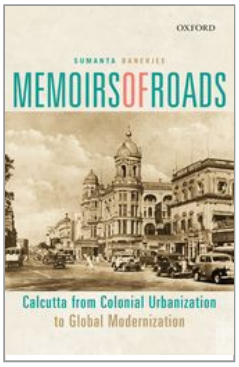

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Sumanta Banerjee

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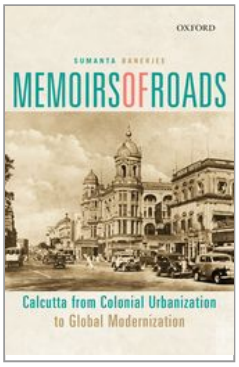

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Epigraph

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(p.v)

> ‘Trodden by many feet, oh path, don’t muffle in your dust the sounds of the footsteps from the past. I am lending my ear to those sounds. Please whisper them to me.’
>
> — Rabindranath Tagore, ***Lipika*** **(p.vi)**

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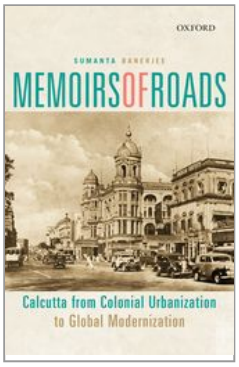

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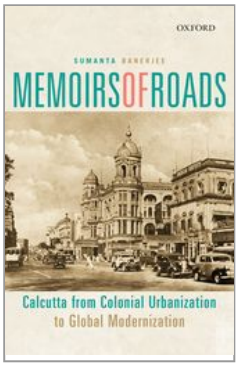

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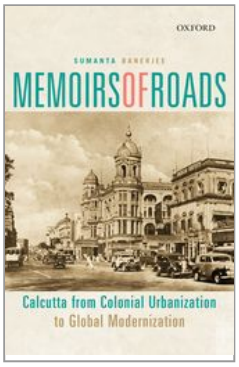

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Introduction

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Abstract and Keywords

Roads have acted as important conduits in all civilizations to serve purposes that ranged from the commercial to the military. Along with the advancement in technology, roads were built with more sophisticated surfaces to be able to bear new forms of vehicular traffic. Bullock-cart pathways thus developed into motorways. Apart from serving the need of interconnectivity between distant places, roads became necessary for connectivity within a particular space—the city. With growing urbanization, roads became an important tool for administrators to reorganize old spaces (mainly rural), to primarily suit their political and economic purposes. At the same time, the new space in the shape of roads provided common citizens with the opportunity of connecting with each other in their daily business transactions and professional work, as well as in their social existence.

Keywords: Road, traffic, urbanization, citizens, connectivity, motorway

The three elements of nature—water, air, and earth—have given us the means of transportation and communication. But there has always been a contest among the three over the possession of space. Of them, water, through its seas and rivers, has been the first to offer humans the opportunity to carve out routes for trade and commerce. Waterways still remain a major mode of exporting and importing commercial goods from one port to another. But water has also been a rather unfaithful friend to human beings. Its inherent nature of fluidity makes rivers drift and change their courses, which both created and destroyed civilizations in the past. Further, in alliance with its other partner, air, it often turns out to be treacherous. While there is no doubt that the airborne rain helps

rivers to swell and irrigate lands, aiding in agriculture, air behaves erratically—moving from total abstinence to extreme indulgence. Sometimes, it withdraws rain and starves the rivers of water, causing droughts, and at other times, it makes rain suddenly pour down in a calamitous waterfall, making rivers overflow into floods, destroying the very agricultural fields that it had once nurtured. It can even result in cyclonic disasters like tsunamis, which destroy human habitation.

Air was a late addition to the field of transportation and communication, and air transport only became possible with the invention of modern technology like airplanes and satellites. This technology has indeed facilitated global intercommunication by collapsing distances with the help of speed. But that too has been no smooth affair. The whims of air such as storms or cyclones not only have disastrous effects on air transport **(p.2)** and its passengers, but also disrupt satellite-dependent communication systems.

Compared to these two nature-based sources of traditional and modern modes of transportation and communication (water and air), land has remained a more reliable and safer friend of humanity. It has opened up its solid base to its inhabitants as a firm ground for roads (barring occasional earthquakes); roads and the structures built on it are less vulnerable to nature’s quirks like floods, storms, cyclones, and so on, that disrupt riverine and aerial transport on a massive scale. The land-based routes have, therefore, remained a robust spatial backbone for the development of modern urban civilization. It is the submissive viability of land that has allowed human beings to intervene and utilize it to an extent that they can never hope to replicate in similar endeavours to exploit the resources of water and air for the purpose of communication.

As a product of human intervention on the natural landscape, roads are a record of the long history of the inventiveness and creativity of men in utilizing the earth and its spaces to serve their interests. Roads were first carved out as footpaths through jungles and fields by travellers. They were then turned into lanes for bullock carts and horse-driven carriages to carry both passengers and merchandize. With time and the development of technology, better roads began to be built with new materials to ensure their permanence. Besides their surface, engineers also started to exploit the underbelly of roads in order to dig underground sewerage systems as a part of the urban health system. Still later, roads were further dug under to create a parallel transport system—the underground railway—that ran underneath the highways of surface traffic.

The Political Economy of Road-Building

Roads are thus an ancient human institution, which could be considered, as it were, the circulatory system of human society and civilization. It has given birth to cities and nourished them, provided channels for **(p.3)** trade and communication of ideas, and has also been turned into sites of great battles that

overturned empires to replace them with others. The road, like no other institution, brings together almost all facets of human life in one common space. People live their existence through roads—dwelling in houses, shopping in markets, walking or travelling in vehicles, and seeking entertainment in roadside theatre houses or eating joints. The road, in this way, plays a decisive role in transforming the surrounding reality and bringing about socio-economic, political, and cultural changes in the lives of residents living on its either side.

At the same time, we should remember that the history of road-building has had another side to it which is unsavoury. Driven by the growing urge for urbanization, the state has often ruthlessly ousted people from their homelands to make way for highways that cut through their traditional habitat.

Thousands of anonymous men and women had to make sacrifices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the construction of the important roads that today adorn the cities of the West, as well as those of its former empires. Even in the present era, the same drive for urban expansion and the consequent need for carving out roads are destroying both human settlements and natural habitats in developing countries, displacing their inhabitants on a massive scale. According to futuristic speculation, in the next two decades, more than 5,90,000 square miles of land globally—about the size of Mongolia—will be gobbled up by cities.[1] The speculation is based on the fact that from 1970 to 2000, India, China, and Africa have experienced the highest rate of land acquisition for urban expansion.[2] Much of this land had been expropriated from villagers—either by force or by paying them a paltry sum as compensation—leaving them destitute, surviving as beggars or daily-wage labourers in an urban metropolis situated on the same soil that once used to be their village homeland. Thus, the construction and use of the road has always been fraught with tensions, with a disjunction between the interests of those who made the road and those who used it. **(p.4)**

It is believed that the first paved road was built in Egypt in 2500 BC by Pharaoh Cheops as a private path to reach the site of the Great Pyramid. It was 1,000 yards long and 60 feet wide. Obviously, it was a demonstration of the exclusive privilege that the ruler enjoyed. But the political needs of the rulers—expansion of their territory, rapid movement of their armies, making their presence felt in the distant corners of their states—soon led to the construction of public highways. One of the earliest such roads was what is described as the King’s Highway in the Old Testament. As its name suggests, it was built by royalty. Laid down in 2000 BC, it provided a major route for both conquering armies and traders, stretching from Damascus to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south, through Syria to Mesopotamia, and finally on to Egypt. This road was later renamed Trojan’s Road by the Romans. The same road was to be used in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by the Crusaders in their war to reclaim the Holy Land. Among other ancient roads was the Royal Road, built by the Persians from the Persian Gulf to the Aegean Sea—a distance of 1,775 miles. The Incas in South America

constructed a system of roads that enabled them to expand their empire and govern large stretches of that part of the continent. Ironically, it was these same roads built by the Incas that betrayed them and proved to be their downfall. Another generation of empire-builders—the Spaniards—used these roads to move in their militarily superior soldiers and weapons for invading Inca territory and defeating them.[3]

Thus, once built, irrespective of their original purposes, roads may not remain partisan or neutral for long. They cannot be claimed to be the exclusive property of their planners alone. Like the published text of authors, roads become accessible to the public who may interpret (use) them according to their tastes and needs. The Grand Trunk Road in South Asia is an excellent example of how a once royal highway has become a public thoroughfare. This road spans India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, linking the eastern part of the subcontinent with the western part. Its origins can be traced back to some 2,000 years ago **(p.5)** to the reign of the Mauryas. In the sixteenth century, King Sher Shah of India reconstructed the road, giving it the name Sadak-e-Azam, to facilitate the movement of his army and for administrative purposes. It also remained a vital link for trade and communication. Today, the road is split into two halves. One is known as National Highway 1, stretching from Delhi to Wagah on the Indo-Pak border in the west. The other is National Highway 2, starting from Delhi and stretching to Kolkata in the east. Neither the Mauryas nor Sher Shah could have dreamt of the way their road is being used today. Buses choking with passengers, heavy trucks in a mad rush overtaking other vehicles, oil tankers precariously edging their way through meandering bullock carts and aimlessly wandering cattle, and the never-ending stream of human pedestrian traffic—all these sights and sounds are a far cry from the ancient description of soldiers riding horses along this road to conquer new lands or caravans of traders stopping at wayside inns on the way to their next destination.

Traders and their stakes in interstate commercial traffic were the other factors (along with the political requirements of the state) that motivated road-building in the past. Roads became necessary for transportation of commodities from their centres of production to market outlets. They began to be developed by traders. Interestingly enough, unlike the state-built roads, which were known to the public by the names of the rulers who built them, these roads were named after the commodities which passed through them. Thus, we hear of the Amber Route, which stretched from Afghanistan through Persia and Arabia to Egypt. Or, the famous Silk Route, covering some 8,000 miles, beginning in China, traversing across Asia, and then through Spain to the Atlantic Ocean. We can imagine traders in the earliest days using slow animals to carry heavy goods over the rough, unpaved roads. With the development of vehicular traffic, some of the stretches of these ancient paths were turned into metalled roads and converted to modern highways. While looking back at history, we can, therefore, comprehend the twin **(p.6)** motivations that lay behind the evolution of what is

known today as the modern road system—the economic interests of the traders and the political interests of the rulers.

Impact of the Wheel on the Road

Over the years, the development of technology further emboldened the twin forces discussed earlier to raise the science of road-building to new heights. The invention of motorized vehicles, which needed smooth paths to accelerate the delivery of commercial merchandize and take human passengers to their destination, spurred both the state and its commercial allies to invest in road reconstruction. Roads had to be made to keep pace with the new fast-moving modes of traffic—motor vehicles carrying citizens, trucks carrying commercial goods, and so on. Appropriate technology of road reconstruction evolved to meet the new demands of vehicular traffic. As Hilaire Belloc observed:

> It was the Vehicle that made the Road. It was the Wheel that made the Vehicle. But the Wheel having made the Vehicle, and the Vehicle having made the Road, the Road reacted back upon that which made it; and though we cannot say that the Highway has, in changing, created a change in Vehicles, yet we can say that, had it not changed, the new Vehicle could not have come into being.[4]

Evolution of the Technology of Road-Building

The origins of paving roads with metal can be traced to 800 BC, when the rulers of Carthage (on the northern coast of Africa) began to use stones to make the mud paths solid. The Romans—who could be described as the pioneers in road-building—paved the way for modern road construction. Their roads were composed of a graded soil foundation, topped by four courses: first, a bedding of sand or mortar; second, rows of large, flat stones; third, a thin layer of gravel mixed with lime; **(p.7)** and fourth, a thin surface of flint, like lava. This design remained the best model till the emergence of modern engineering techniques in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In eighteenth-century England, two British engineers came up with new techniques. Thomas Telford, who was a stonemason, invented a process that involved the digging of a trench first, followed by the installation of a foundation of heavy rock, and ending with its surfacing by a six-inch layer of gravel. The other inventor was John Loudon McAdam (from whose name the term ‘macadam’ came into use in the vocabulary of road technology). His system was based on building the road directly on the subsoil, first raising a layer of stone in the centre for drainage, and then carpeting it by a layer of finer-grained stone that was cemented. The macadam system became popular in nineteenth-century Europe because of the simplicity of the procedure, and its suitability of use by gentle, slow transport like horse driven carriages. But with the advent of fast-moving motorcars and heavy vehicles like trucks carrying merchandize, the macadam roads proved inadequate to cope with the higher speed of vehicles and to bear their load since they lacked a firm foundation beneath the soil. Some of these roads, as well as

the new highways that came up in the twentieth century were, therefore, reconstructed according to the Telford system, which provided a more solid roadbed for such heavy traffic.[5]

Road-building seemed to reach a saturation point towards the end of the nineteenth century. The building of canals and the railway system provided other means of transportation. But soon, the arrival of motorized vehicles like passenger-carrying cars and buses and freight-carrying trucks spurred renewed activities in road-building at a more technologically sophisticated level.

Road Networks and the Politics of Urbanization

Along with their qualitative improvement, roads also gained in quantitative importance. They expanded in wider directions, spreading to distant **(p.8)** corners of countries and binding them in networks. Road networks evolved in a synergic relationship with urbanization, each reinforcing the other. Their growth was spurred by the drive for urban expansion, and they themselves accelerated the speed of urban development. As one exponent of the network theory, Vito Latora, points out, evolution of road networks is driven by two key elements: exploration, whereby new roads trigger spatial evolution beyond the outskirts of the town, and densification or the increase in local road density around existing urban centres. 'Exploration', he says, 'is more common during earlier historical periods, whereas densification predominates in later years.'[6]

Roads thus get inextricably linked with cities. The original mud lane that used to be the pathway for villagers was the first to be turned into a road during the gradual transformation of that village into a city. Most modern roads in our metropolitan cities can trace back their roots to the humble village lane.[7] These lanes evolved into wider roads along which were built structures that served the needs of the urban population—houses, shops, markets, entertainment centres, and parks, among other things. These new roads, besides continuing to be the path of pedestrians, opened up a wide avenue for generations of vehicular traffic, ranging from bullock carts and horse carriages to motor cars and trucks.

Roads became an important component of the physical infrastructure needed for urbanization. Urbanization in modern times, however, is not a sporadic process initiated by individual ruling dynasties (as we find in the history of ancient cities like Rome or medieval cities like Lucknow). It is a well-organized programme of industrial capitalism, which invests its profit in infrastructure that would further expand its empire. Cities are built to house its commercial and administrative centres and warehouses, to provide dwelling spaces for the white-collar employees of these centres as well as for the workers employed in the neighbouring industrial units, and shops and markets are set up for the use of this vast conglomeration of citizens. A major part of the investment by industrial capitalism is in roadways, rail roads, and ports, which **(p.9)** are the main means

of binding together these innumerable different segments of an ever-expanding economic system.

Linking this modern form of urbanization with the rise of capitalism in the West, European Marxist theoreticians stress that urbanization was both the product of and the driving force for the absorption of ‘surplus product’ in the process of capital accumulation. Surplus product was necessary for producing surplus value (leading to profit). Surpluses (whether from agriculture, mineral resources, or industrial manufacturing) were extracted and their use controlled by a minority of capitalist investors and entrepreneurs. They needed a vast majority of consumers who could purchase the surplus product, and thus yield profit for the capitalist investors. This majority could be brought together in one single space—the city. Modern cities, therefore, were developed to market the surplus product. To quote the best exponent of this theory, David Harvey: ‘Capitalism is perpetually producing the surplus product that urbanization requires … [and] needs urbanization to absorb the surplus products it perpetually produces…. The politics of capitalism are affected by the perpetual need to find profitable terrains for capital surplus production and absorption.’[8] One of the most profitable terrains is the city, and it is on this terrain that the consumers are made to concentrate through a variety of infrastructural attractions: provision of employment, housing, civic facilities, schools and hospitals, entertainment, and so forth. The most important element in this vast complex and composite network of infrastructure is the road, which allows the transport system to link together the other elements of the network. To go back to David Harvey’s theory of capital accumulation and urbanization:

> The cost, speed and capacity of the transport system relate directly to accumulation because of the impacts these have on the turnover time of capital. Investment and innovation in transport are therefore potentially productive for capital in general. Under capitalism, consequently, we see a tendency to ‘drive beyond all spatial barriers’ and to ‘annihilate space with time’ [to use Marx’s own expression].[9] **(p.10)**

Along with the shrinking of distance through the speed of movement by accelerating the transport system, the capitalist town planner also reorganizes space by changing the arrangement of buildings and streets. Such re-arrangements reflect complex relations between social process and spatial form —a ‘socio-spatial dialectic’ (as described by Edward W. Soja).[10] They also conceal deeper political and commercial motives of the ruling powers that administer the cities. For instance, in the name of ‘beautification’ (which appeals to the upper and middle class citizens), these urban administrators demolish slums (where the poor citizens live) in order to set up housing complexes or offices. Such projects trigger a boom in real estate speculation, which in its turn swells the coffers of private contractors and builders with public funds. Besides the commercial motive behind such reorganization of space, long-term political

calculations also play their part. The demolition of a slum breaks down a settled concentration of the labouring poor, who are forced to disperse in different directions. This destroys their potential to mobilize in protest against injustice. Such a paradigm for reorganization of space in modern urbanization was set years ago by Baron Georges Haussmann in Paris. Under the 'second empire' (1851–70), Napoleon III appointed him as Prefect of the Seine, with the task of restructuring the streets of Paris. Haussmann demolished slums and built through them wide new roads and boulevards, and constructed imposing offices and apartment blocks on both sides. It was not a coincidence that Haussmann's plan to change the road structure of Paris came in the wake of the 1848 popular uprising in that city, when workers built barricades around street corners and fought the state's armed forces. Walter Benjamin succinctly analyses the motives behind Haussmann's plan:

> The true goal of Haussmann's works was to secure the city against civil war.... The width of the avenues was to prohibit the erection [of street barricades] and new streets were to provide the shortest routes between the [military] barracks and the working class sections.[11]

(p.11) ## Status of the Road in the New Era of Globalized Urbanization

In the present era of globalization, when urban space is being reorganized again in a new fashion, the road assumes a different character and role to play. New modes of urban planning are coming up in this phase of transition—there is a change from the Fordist model of accumulation and production (involving the manufacturing of standardized commodities and provision of standardized welfare services) to a post-Fordist one that stresses on specialization in the production of specific commodities and the offering of predominantly privatized services at expensive rates that cater to the needs and demands of a new upper crust of citizens (for example, luxury goods; private nursing homes for medical care; and educational institutes with exorbitant fees that welcome only children of the rich to the exclusion of the less privileged).[12]

A large part of this new urban upper crust consists of employers and employees in the information sector—the impact of which is no longer confined to urban inter-communication, but extends to all sectors of the economy, ranging from agriculture (where farmers use their mobile phones to know about latest market prices of their products) to the urban stock market (where speculators are both physically and mentally entwined with this technology). Members of this all-dominating technology empire are refashioning the city according to their requirements and tastes.

These electronically based communities of individuals and organizations do not depend on traditional roads to interact, but use the Internet and kindred electronic networks. They consist of executives employed in multinational firms, business house magnates, and real estate agents and contractors engaged in the

construction of buildings that are impressive enough for the use of their nouveau riche clients. They thus reconstitute the spaces in the city in their own image. **(p.12)**

Ensconced within their private homes and offices, they may need the road only for occasional forays into entertainment centres or for adventures that cannot be provided through the virtual reality of television channels. But their existence depends on an economy of high productivity and advanced technology—a rather fragile base that fluctuates with ups and downs in the global economy.[13] Will the road come back again in their living experience?

Roads as Homes

Meanwhile, the present model of refashioning urban space by the corporate–technocrat–bureaucrat oligarchy is impacting both the labouring poor and the environment. The implementation of the model involves appropriation of the lands and homesteads of vast sections of people dependent on agriculture are deprived of their livelihoods and have to take to the roads. Working in the various segments of the informal sector, these homeless people inhabit the margins of the new metropolises, roads being their last refuge where they sleep every night by putting up temporary shacks of plastic sheets and cardboard covers supported by bamboo poles, to be dismantled every morning to make way for pedestrians. According to a survey published in 2010, some 70,000 people live in such conditions in Calcutta's pavements.[14]

Many among these pavement dwellers who are under-employed or unemployed are compelled to drift towards the criminal underworld for their survival and resort to a variety of nefarious occupations (like smuggling, peddling drugs, working as mercenaries for political bosses and land mafia, among many other such avenues of a similar nature). Thus, as the well-known sociologist of urban transition Richard Sennett suggests, the decline of job security among the labouring classes in the present era of New Capitalism 'corrodes the workers' character'.[15]

The other areas where this model of refashioning urban spaces has had an impact are environment and urban architecture. The eminent **(p.13)** architectural historian Spiro Kostof has drawn our attention to two interesting factors among others. First, Kostof recalls the history of suburbanization in the West that was facilitated by land speculation and new modes of transportation (similar determinants that spur the latest globalized model of urbanization of greater Kolkata through encroachment on the suburbs—an issue that will be dealt with at the end of this book). Second, he talks about the impact of architectural innovations on the landscape of roads, like the rise of skyscrapers in New York from the 1870s onwards, followed by other cities all over the world. He discovers tensions between the practice of single buildings planned by individual families and the design of housing apartment blocks planned by

commercial agencies to meet the collective housing needs of a particular class or group.[16] These tensions throw up interesting questions in the Indian context. How do these new architectural structures (usually gated communities) that are coming up in Kolkata and other cities affect the old spirit of shared concerns that had prevailed among the residents in the neighbourhood (called *para* in Bengali parlance) of the roads where these housing complexes are being constructed?

Outside the gated existence of these privileged few, the vast masses still remain intrinsically joined with the road. The road opens itself up to ever newer generations of users, who form fresh identities, build new settlements, and engender different notions of community along the road. At the same time, the road is not a mere passive recipient of the footprints of successive generations of travellers and settlers, historical events, and technological innovations. Every road has a life of its own. It enjoys an autonomy of sorts, interacting with the local needs of its inhabitants rather than submitting to the rules of urban planning by a central authority.

Understanding a City through Roads

Roads are the entryway into a city. While one road may take the traveller to a city, once she enters, some other road may take over and seduce **(p.14)** her to move from one destination to another. All through history, both littérateurs and academicians have happily chosen to be thus seduced like the nineteenth-century French poet Baudelaire, roaming around the streets of Paris as a flaneur, breathing in its smells, and immersing himself in its sights and sounds; or the twenty-first-century historian Peter Ackroyd, writing the biography of London, moving from its ancient roads, through the Victorian streets, to arrive at the modern highways. Ackroyd looks at London within the schema of a 'body'. 'The byways of the city', he writes, 'resemble thin veins and its parks are like lungs. In the mist and rain of an urban autumn, the shining stones and cobbles of the older thoroughfares look as if they are bleeding.'[17]

The present author prefers to look at the evolution of roads in Calcutta under the schema of a 'family'. Following the practice of the homogeneous joint family (*ekannoborti poribar*, the Bengali term to describe the tradition of sharing a common kitchen in old households), the earliest roads can be said to have given birth to all the streets and lanes, and like grandmothers took under their fold their descendants—the by-lanes and alleys. These early roads thus became hoary matriarchs. In Calcutta, one such ancient road is Chitpur Road (known as Rabindra Sarani today), which has existed as an arterial road from the precolonial era, when it served as a path for pilgrims travelling from the north to the Kalighat Temple in the south. Over the years, it has given birth to a host of lanes and their progeny that twist their ways behind the main thoroughfare. In a similar fashion, the evolution of the two other longitudinal highways that cut through Calcutta from the north to the south has been marked by the

proliferation of by-lanes and side streets. The first is the Circular Road (its northern part now renamed Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road, and its southern end Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Road), which was built in the early nineteenth century by the British administration by covering up a ditch that was dug in the 1740s by the East India Company to protect Calcutta from Marhatta invaders. The construction of the **(p.15)** second road, Central Avenue, began in the mid-nineteenth century, and today, through a process of gradual expansion, it has become a full-fledged arterial road, now renamed Chittaranjan Avenue. Historically, these three roads—Chitpur Road, Circular Road, and Central Avenue—can be described as the grandmothers of all the streets and lanes that criss-cross today's Kolkata.

The present book is a story of three Calcutta roads, which—unlike the three longitudinal highways—horizontally cut across the city's topography from the west to the east. They have been chosen because their intersection with the three main highways at various points and historical stages has produced diverse political and socio-economic currents, and led to the growth of institutions that have shaped the minds of Calcutta's citizens.

To put it in terms of an extended family, the first road, Bagbazar Street, could be described as the grandmother, a matriarch spreading her progeny of lanes and by-lanes. The second, Theatre Road, played the extraneous role of a midwife bringing to birth a hybrid lifestyle and architecture that bore the signature of the colonial era. The evolution of the next road, Rashbehari Avenue, can be likened to the growing up of a middle-class Bengali housewife gingerly stepping out into the limelight of modern society. By narrating their history, we attempt to understand the socio-cultural and politico-economic changes in the city since its birth, through a critical synthesis of micro and macro perspectives that combine views from both above (official archives) and below (popular perceptions).

The narrative ends with a brief examination of the new stage today in the urbanization of Calcutta—the city's expansion into a globalized megalopolis renamed Kolkata. The two names have been used as interchangeable terms while narrating the history. Ironically enough, the new urban nomenclature harks back to the name of the old village Dihi Kolikata, which, along with two other villages, was bought by the East India Company to be constituted later as the city of Calcutta. **(p.16)**

To continue with the concept of the family as a metaphor for the chronicle of its roads, we can extend it today to an examination of the planning and designing of the megalopolis and its transportation system (emerging on the north-eastern tip of the city designated as New Town). It reflects the latest stage of the nuclear household in the evolution of the family as an institution. Unlike the inclusive spirit of the extended family system of roads built in the past (like those still existing in parts of Calcutta that allow space for confrontations as well as

negotiations for conflict resolution through street processions and mass gatherings, among other forms of public demonstrations), New Town and its road design epitomize the extremist, exclusive mood of nuclear families of the new generation that inhabit this zone. Theirs is a psychology of self-protection within a gated community, and when stepping outside, of travelling in fast-moving air-conditioned private vehicles along flyovers that are designed to spare them the unpleasant sights and smells of slums and to debar pedestrians from interrupting the race of upward mobility.

It is worth recalling in this connection the observation made some thirty years ago by the American philosopher Marshall Berman on the history of changes in the road system in the West:

> For most of our century, urban spaces have been systematically designed and organized to ensure that collisions and confrontations will not take place here. The distinctive sign of nineteenth-century urbanism was the boulevard, a medium for bringing explosive material and human forces together; the hallmark of twentieth-century urbanism has been the highway, a means for putting them asunder.[18]

Notes:

(1.) Michail Fragkias, Burak Güneralp, Karen Seto, and Julie Goodness, 'Typologies of Urbanization Projections, Effects on Land Use, Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services', available at http://chm-thai.onep.go.th/chm/city/document/CBO-scientific/CBO-SAA_Chapter-7_13-Oct-2012.pdf, last accessed on 13 July 2016.

(2.) SETO LAB, Urbanization and Global Change, 'Forecasting Urban Growth', available at Urban.yale.edu/research/theme-3, last accessed on 13 July 2016.

(3.) Shirley Sponholtz, *A Brief History of Road Building*, available at http://www.triplenine.org/Vidya/OtherArticles/ABriefHistoryofRoadBuilding.aspx, last accessed 13 July 2016.

(4.) Hilaire Belloc, *The Highway and Its Vehicles* (London: The Studio Ltd, 1926), p. 27.

(5.) Sponholtz, *A Brief History of Road Building*.

(6.) Vito Latora quoted in 'Road Networks Said Urbanization Driver', 1 March 2012, available at www.upi.com/Science_News/2012/03/01/Road-networks-said-urbanization-driver/54271330629507/, last accessed 13 July 2016.

(7.) Bagbazar Street, for instance, was a bullock-cart path in the village of Sutanuti some three hundred years ago, meant for the use of cloth merchants.

(8.) David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso Books, 2012), p. 5.

(9.) David Harvey, 'The Urban Process under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis', in *The Blackwell City Reader*, edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002), pp. 119–20.

(10.) Edward. W. Soja, 'Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis', in Bridge and Watson, *Blackwell City Reader*.

(11.) Quoted in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* by Susan Buck-Morss (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 222.

(12.) Soja, 'Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis'.

(13.) Saskia Sassen, 'Globalization and Its Discontents,' in Bridge and Watson, *Blackwell City Reader*.

(14.) Action Aid Report, quoted in the *Statesman*, 15 October 2010.

(15.) Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

(16.) Spiro Kostof, *A Historical Survey of Architecture and Urbanism* (1991), available at http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/kostof.html, last accessed 13 July 2016.

(17.) Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p. 1.

(18.) Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 165.

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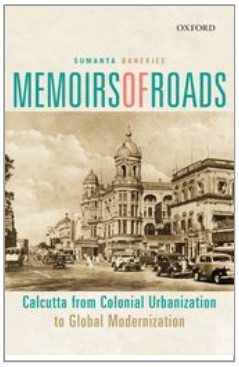

Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Modernization
Sumanta Banerjee

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Colonial and Postcolonial Planning of a City

Calcutta and Its Roads

Sumanta Banerjee

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Abstract and Keywords

British colonial power, represented by the East India Company in the early eighteenth century, recognized the importance of road-building as a major means of establishing and reinforcing its authority over territories (in this case comprising the three villages of Sutanuti, Kolikata and Gobindapur) that it acquired through a deal with the then Moghul regime. It reconstructed the old mud-laden arterial paths that ran from the north to the south and from the west to the east, into gravel roads that were suitable for the movement of its military vehicles, as well as its traders. After Independence, the landmarks of these old roads underwent changes, particularly with the expansion of the city in the south. Today, the new road system of flyovers is leading to further expansion towards the north-eastern part, and changing its topography.

Keywords: Colonialism, East India Company, Independence, Sutanuti, Kolikata, Gobindapur, arterial path, gravel roads

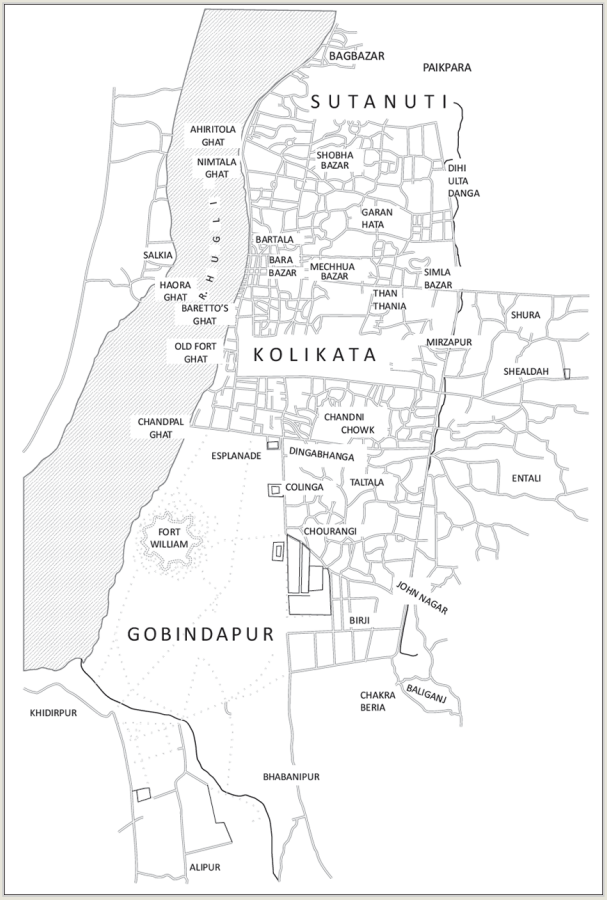
Calcutta is an illuminating example of the urbanization of a pre-industrial society under colonial planning and its legacy in the post-Independence era. Unlike urban development in modern capitalist societies of the West, where indigenous industrial and commercial interests shaped to a large extent the contours of the city, in the colonies the process through which cities developed can be described as ‘dependent urbanization’ (a term used by Manuel Castells).[1] In other words, in colonies like India, new cities were created (for example, Calcutta), and old cities were restructured (for example, Delhi) to meet the changing requirements

of the colonial rulers—ranging from business and military to administrative interests—during the various stages of their regime.

The Origins of Calcutta

The city originated from the East India Company's initial attraction for the site as a commercial centre, and later, because of the possibilities of future colonial expansion. The area consisted of three villages—Sutanuti in the north, Kolikata in the centre, and Gobindapur in the south (see Map 1.1). **(p.19)**

(p.20) They were owned by the Sabarna Roy Chowdhury family. In 1698, the Company paid a Mughal prince, Farrukshiyar (who wielded considerable influence in the court in Delhi at that time), a sum of 16,000 rupees to obtain a grant of permission to buy these three villages. The Company then purchased them from the local Sabarna Roy Chowdhury landlords—Ramchand Ray, Manohar Ray, and others—by paying them 1,300 rupees.[2] The total cost that the East India Company incurred, therefore, in investing in creating an urban metropolis amounted to a little over 17,000 rupees. Compare this with the profits that they accumulated on this investment over the next decades, and their successors—the British rulers—did over the next two centuries.[3]



Map 1.1 Sutanuti, Kolikata, and Gobindapur, 1690, based on a map of the late seventeenth century by George Herron

Source: Courtesy of the author.

Soon after buying the three villages, the East India Company officials set about transforming them into a full-fledged town. In the earlier years, they concentrated on the two villages Sutanuti and Kolikata, in the north and centre respectively, for their plan of urbanization. They first built accommodation for their soldiers in Fort William (constructed in 1698 and named after the then reigning British monarch, William III) in Kolikata village (the site being occupied today by the General Post Office). They then set up offices for their commercial

and administrative operations, and encouraged European traders to settle in these areas of Sutanuti and Kolikata. The Company's Court of Directors from London issued the following instruction:

> Calcutta should be advanced to the dignity of a presidency … the President should draw a salary of Rs 200/- per month with an additional gratuity of Rs 100/-; that he should be assisted by a Council of 4 members; of whom the first should be the Accountant, and the second the Warehouse Keeper, the third the Marine Purser; and the fourth the Receiver of the Revenues.[4]

British settlers and administrators started the process of urbanization of these villages by clearing jungles to construct roads—the most important infrastructure for building a city. Maps and accounts available from the turn of the eighteenth century show that at the time of the arrival of **(p.21)** the British, there were only two arterial roads that covered these villages and nearby areas. One ran from the north in Chitpur to the south in Kalighat through the jungles of the neighbouring village of Chourungi. It was described as the 'Pilgrim Road' by contemporary British settlers, because of the Hindu devotees who used it to reach the Kali Temple in the south.[5] The other was a parallel road on the east (later known as the Circular Road), which moved down towards the south-west.

Over the next fifty years—from 1706 to 1756—both the town and its streets grew at a rapid pace. The size of the town increased from 1,692 acres to 3,229 acres, and the number of streets from two to twenty-seven, along with the creation of some fifty-two lanes and seventy-four by-lanes. With the influx of entrepreneurs (like agents engaged in commercial transactions, traders, shopkeepers, and so on) and manual labourers looking for earning opportunities in the expanding town, the population grew and so did the houses on either side of these roads and lanes. From only eight brick-built (described as 'pucca' in contemporary records) houses in 1706, the number rose to 498 in 1756. They were mainly inhabited by English traders and administrators, who were later joined by Bengali and other Indian entrepreneurs. As for the labouring classes, they lived in mud houses with thatched roofs. Their number went up from 8,000 to 14,450 during the fifty-year period under survey.[6]

The final conquest of Bengal by the British following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 was a turning point in the further expansion of Calcutta and its roads. The British rulers were now firmly saddled in the fledgling town, and began to redesign it according to their administrative and political priorities. One of the first plans was to shift their fort (Fort William, which housed their soldiers) from the Kolikata part of the town (where it was set up in 1698) to further south, in the Gobindapur village. This decision was prompted by their bitter experience in 1756, when in June that year Siraj-ud-dowlah, the Nawab of Bengal, attacked Calcutta and first threatened their fortifications in Sutanuti in the north, and still later overran Fort William in Kolikata. The northern and central parts of **(p.22)**

the town (covering the sites of the old villages of Sutanuti and Kolikata) were, therefore, no longer considered safe. The East India Company then decided to develop the southern village of Gobindapur as a township of sorts by installing their military base (the second Fort William) in the western part, on the banks of the Hooghly River, and providing residential quarters for the European inhabitants in the eastern part.

Construction of the new Fort William in the western zone of Gobindapur, on the banks of the Hooghly, began in 1758 and was completed in 1773. This long period involved large-scale displacement of the villagers of Gobindapur. The East India Company gave cash compensation to the Bengali well-to-do families who owned pucca or brick-built houses in the village, and encouraged them to move northwards and buy lands and settle in the Sutanuti area. This led to the development of settlements on either side of the old Chitpur Road and the creation of new streets and lanes, winding out from behind the main road, where these newly displaced Bengali families built their houses.[7] It was this area in the north that came to be known as the Black Town in the parlance of the British colonial authorities as well as European travellers.

As for the poor villagers of Gobindapur who lived in mud huts, they were removed to the villages of Chourungi and Kalinga on the eastern part for their resettlement. Here, a group of English traders and entrepreneurs had already settled down by clearing the jungles, carving out roads and plots for their own use, and building houses. They had also laid down the base for a major arterial road, which is known today as Chowringhee Road (deriving its name from the village of Chourungi). These people needed manual labour to run their establishments. The East India Company, therefore, resettled the poor villagers from Gobindapur in this area, where the English residents rented out their spare plots to the Company for the setting up of slums to accommodate these labourers. These slums were named after the English owners—like Duncan's Bustee, Colvin's Bustee ('bustee', being the indigenous **(p.23)** term for slum). The slum-dwellers either worked as domestics in these European households, or as artisans to cater to their regular needs.

These English and European residents cut up slices of Chourungi and Kalinga villages into roads and streets. They christened them with their own names, and according to their living style (for example, Camac Street, Kyd Street, Park Street, Theatre Road, Elysium Row, and so forth).[8] They constituted what came to be designated as the White Town in the historical narrative of colonial Calcutta.

From a Town to a City—through Roads

After having fortified themselves and resettled the villagers, the Company drew up plans to turn the town into a city. It first concentrated on the White Town to cater to the needs of its residents. To quote one instance, from old records we

find that in 1776 a sum of 125 rupees was paid to Mr Fortnam, described as a ‘civil architect’, for the purpose of making ‘one water-course in the Chowringhee Road’ (that is, an open drain).[9]

But we also come across enterprising English residents who were willing to volunteer to develop the whole of Calcutta. For instance, a certain Colonel Campbell inserted a notice in the newspaper *Hickey’s Gazette* in 1781, where he made a proposal of ‘cleaning and draining the town, on an estimate of two lacs of rupees per annum’. Still later, one Mr Henckell cleared considerable portions of the Sunderban jungles near the town, ‘which greatly contributed to diminish the local sources of fever’. But it was Marquess Wellesley who in 1799 enlarged and extended the road system in Calcutta, especially the Circular Road in the east. This particular arterial road, which linked the north-eastern with the south-western parts of the town, was considered by the English citizens to be a ‘great improvement’, although to construct the road, the famous Baithakkhana tree (a huge tree, which had been the ‘place of assemblage for native merchants from the earliest period’ and served as an open air *baithakkhana* or sitting room from the early eighteenth **(p.24)** century onwards) was cut down—an act which was ‘looked upon with superstitious regret’ by the Bengali residents.[10]

Nevertheless, during this early stage of Calcutta’s urbanization, sections of Bengali residents also participated in the colonial plans of road-building. In fact, the trading communities among them had been the pioneers in shaping roads that served their commercial interests. The Sheths and Basacks were the traditional Bengali traders who had been exporting textile goods to the European trading houses for decades. Even before the establishment of the East India Company’s rule, they were the first to clear the jungles in the northern village of Sutanuti (which was to be a part of the future city of Calcutta) and construct a lane from the west to the east (to be known in future as Bagbazar Street) to facilitate the transport of their goods to the harbour on the River Hooghly. They built houses for themselves and set up markets where European traders came to buy the merchandize. After the East India Company took over this site in 1698, it chose the Sheths in particular as their protégés for their plan of future urbanization. In 1707, the Company reduced ground rents for the estates of the Sheths in Sutanuti. In exchange for the concession, the Company required the Sheths to take care of a major road. A notification issued by the Company said:

> In consideration that Janundun Seat [Jadunandan or Janardhan Sheth?], Gopaul Seat, Jadoo Seat, Banarsi Seat [all Sheths?] and Jay Kissen will keep in repair the highway between the Fort’s landmark to the norward on the backside of the town, we have thought fit to abate them 8 annas a bigha of their garden rent, which is about rupees 55 in the whole less than it is ordered.[11]

In other words, these Bengali merchants were entrusted with the maintenance of the arterial road known as Chitpur that ran from the north to the south near the site of the then Fort William (today's General Post Office in Dalhousie Square), or as described in the notification as 'the highway between the Fort's landmark to the norward on the backside [*sic*] of the town'. **(p.25)**

The colonial rulers thus recognized the importance of the road as an essential infrastructure (highways in this case) in the project of urbanization as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century. In its pursuit of integrating all the major regions under its control by connecting arteries of communication, the East India Company was even ready to outsource a public undertaking like road-building to private individuals like members of the Bengali mercantile community. Calcutta, therefore, was not 'chance directed, chance erected', as Rudyard Kipling would have us believe in his famous poem on the city.[12] On the contrary, the first generation of British traders-turned-rulers who arrived and settled in this area soon formulated a deliberate plan to turn it into a full-fledged city from where they could conduct both their commercial and administrative operations—for which they needed roads.

In fact, in order to build roads in Calcutta, the British rulers resorted to a curious device. To fund their construction, they encouraged and institutionalized a form of gambling among their own employees and other citizens. They began to raise money for road-building by means of lotteries. In 1817, they set up a regular Lottery Committee, sanctioned and patronized by the then governor-general-in-council. It issued tickets of a certain value for sale, promising prizes for lucky winners of numbered tickets. According to the Frenchman Victor Jacquemont, who visited Calcutta in 1829 (a little over a decade after the institution of the Lottery Committee), every six months, six thousand such tickets were issued, each costing 128 rupees. He noted: 'The number of civil and military officers … amounts to about six thousand, the same as the tickets.'[13] No doubt the scheme appealed to the gambling instincts of these officers as well as other citizens. It attracted a lot of investors and the funds obtained from them were used to reconstruct old roads in north Calcutta and build new ones in the south.

The laying down of new roads under the Lottery Committee again resulted in the dislocation of a large number of people—this time slum-dwellers. In the Chourungi area for instance, the construction of new roads led to the second displacement of inhabitants living there. These **(p.26)** were the people who had earlier been ousted from their past habitat in the villages of Gobindapur to make way for the building of Fort William, and had resettled in slums owned by Englishmen in the late eighteenth century. When the British authorities began to build new roads in the period between 1820 and 1830, they took possession of the old slums like Colvin's Bustee and Duncan's Bustee, and demolished them to make way for a wide arterial road stretching from the west on what is the

modern Chowringhee Road to the Circular Road in the east. This model of slum clearance was to be followed in other parts of the town also over the next decades of urbanization.

We can, therefore, follow the history of road-building in colonial Calcutta broadly through three successive stages: first, the clearance of jungles in the villages of Sutanuti, Kolikata, and Gobindapur during the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries; second, the clearance of the entire village of Gobindapur at the end of the eighteenth century, accompanied by encroachment on the neighbouring villages of Birji and Chourungi; and third, the clearance of slums in all these areas through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to make roads.

At this stage of our narrative, we can digress into another avenue in order to examine the history of roads in Calcutta from a theoretical perspective. The existing theories of urbanization and road-building—mostly conceptualized by Western theoreticians and town planners—may often be inadequate to explain the complexities of urbanization that lay behind the official plan of building of roads and its subversion by the local underclasses, who carved out lanes and alleys from these roads in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Calcutta.

The Theoretical Prism

Anthony D. King has been a leading theoretician on colonial planning of cities. Taking a cue from his thesis of dividing the colonial planning of cities in three stages, let us examine Calcutta's development and see **(p.27)** how it fits into that theoretical framework. According to King, colonial urban planning passed through three historical phases: (*a*) In the period up to the early twentieth century when settlements, camps, towns, and cities were consciously laid out according to various military, technical, political, and cultural codes and principles, 'the most important … being military and political dominance'. (*b*) In the second period, beginning in the early twentieth century, when in the metropolitan centre of the colonial regime, Britain, there was developing the theory of 'town planning' with its attendant ideology of cultural behaviour in public space, and architectural patterns and structure of roads. The administrators in the colonies sought to replicate this planning in the dependent territories on a selective and uneven basis. (*c*) A third period of post- or neocolonial developments took place after 1947 in Asia, when 'cultural, political and economic links … within a larger network of global communications and a situation of economic dependence, provided the means to continue the transplantation of ideologies, values, and planning models, generally in the "neo-colonial modernization" of once-colonial cities'.[14]

When we extrapolate King's thesis in the Indian situation, we find that the process of colonial urbanization in India, in certain respects, both departs from and conforms to King's theoretical premise. In Calcutta, the British rulers had completed the first phase of 'military and political dominance' by the mid-

eighteenth century, thus predating the period marked by King as the first stage in the history of colonial planning of cities. This first stage of urbanization of Calcutta was marked not only by ‘military and political dominance’, as emphasized by Anthony King in his thesis, but also by collaboration with the indigenous traders, as described earlier.

Role of Bengali Residents in Building Roads and Lanes

Moving forward to the second period of colonial urbanization (which according to King began in the early twentieth century), in Calcutta it **(p.28)** took on new characteristics from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It could not be totally monopolized by the colonial rulers as was suggested in King’s thesis. Their hegemonic plan to create strictly bordered arterial thoroughfares was sabotaged at every stage by the local inhabitants who fragmented them into lanes and by-lanes criss-crossing these thoroughfares—called *goli*s in Bengali. They named these lanes after their own local heroes and heroines. This, even today, we find in north Calcutta a lane called Panchi Dhobani Goli (named after a *dhobani* or a washerwoman who lived in that locality and served its residents in the nineteenth century), and another lane called Gulu Ostagar Lane (celebrating a tailor who was her contemporary). Thus, roads laid down officially by the municipal authorities were fractured by the local people, who carved out from them their own lanes and alleys.

Ironically enough, the proliferation of lanes or golis was indirectly accelerated by the colonial city planners’ schemes of sanitation of the city. From 1859 onwards, they began to construct the underground sewer system for urban waste disposal, which involved restructuring of the old road surface. The sewer system reached the Black Town in the mid-1870s. Before its introduction, open narrow drains behind residential quarters in north Calcutta’s streets used to carry human refuse and other wastes from these houses abutting on them, to be dumped into the big drains on the main roads. Under the newly introduced sewer system, these open drains were covered up to allow the disposal of such waste through pipes placed underground. Their covering up created a new land surface in the shape of narrow stretches along the streets and behind the houses —known as ‘sewered ditches’. They soon began to be used by pedestrians as paths. Describing how these newly created land stretches turned into lanes or golis in north Calcutta, a Calcutta Corporation report narrates:

> There is a sewered ditch which runs along some houses in Gooptu’s Lane, which is a lane branching off from Chitpore Road…. There are several houses abutting on this ditch, which have their drainage connection into the sewer laid in the ditch…. Mehters [scavengers], servants, **(p.29)** mistries [artisans] and other people connected with the houses, use this sewered ditch, and it is used as a thoroughfare by people who want to

> make a short cut from Gooptu's Lane where the sewered ditch begins to Boloram Dey's Street where it ends.[15]

Parallel to this popular incursion from the lower orders in road planning in the northern parts of the town, there was an equally important involvement of a new generation of Bengali upper and middle classes in the planning of roads in the southern parts of the town where they settled down in the late 1890s. They consisted of civil servants and barristers trained in England, as well as teachers, lawyers, medical practitioners, and engineers who had graduated from the educational institutions in Calcutta. They stepped out from the confines of their professional careers to participate in the wider sphere of the national movement from the 1880s onwards. They demanded the introduction of the very mechanisms of the bourgeois democratic system that their colonial rulers followed in their homeland—representation through elections, a voice in the administration of local affairs through municipalities, and a free press, among other rights.

The assertion of their demands coincided with the election of the Liberal Party statesman W.E. Gladstone as prime minister in England, the metropolitan centre of the colonial regime. His party was willing to grant a few concessions to these English-educated native subjects of his government, in tune with the principles of a bourgeois democratic liberal system to which he was wedded. As a result, the colonial authorities in Calcutta enacted a legislation (Act II [B.C.] of 1888), which allowed a large number of members of the Bengali upper middle class to gain entry into the higher echelons of the Calcutta Corporation. Advocates and educationists like Surendranath Banerjee, Bhupendranath Bose, and Ashutosh Mukherjee became commissioners of the Corporation. It was through their efforts that the civic facilities of the Black Town began to improve to some extent from the end of the nineteenth century. They began to assert themselves in decision-making in city planning through **(p.30)** their representation in the city municipality. They exerted their control, to a limited extent, on the 'cultural behavior in public space, and architectural patterns and structures of roads' (as defined by King), in the southern-most part of the town, which was being developed from the later years of the nineteenth century.[16]

Some, from among these upper middle–class Bengalis bought plots in the Ballygunge area (which was earlier a suburb of sorts to the south of the main city), where they set up their homes and built institutions. These settlers consisted of both the descendants of the old zamindar families of the Black Town and other parts of Bengal (known as *bonedi* in Bengali parlance), and the entrants into the new urban professions (who came to form the 'bhadralok' community, in alliance with the bonedi). This resulted in the development of the hitherto neglected southern suburb as an adjunct to the process of modernization of the metropolis. It also contributed to the construction of a new

network of roads and streets in an area that, within a few decades, became a sort of enclave for this section of Bengali bhadraloks.

Present Phase of Town Planning

When we reach the third period of urbanization (as defined by King) in postcolonial societies, in Calcutta we find that in its present phase it conforms to a large extent to King's thesis of 'neo-colonial modernization of once colonial cities'. In the years immediately following Independence, town planners had continued with the paradigm set by colonial rulers. The model of keeping separate the two cultural identities by dividing the city into Black and White Towns was replicated—this time in the south of Calcutta—by reinforcing the cultural differences among the indigenous residents. Development of south Calcutta became a priority at the expense of the north. The roads and houses in the old Black Town of north Calcutta continued to deteriorate, while in the southern part, roads were widened, houses came up with **(p.31)** spacious compounds, and marts were constructed with well-built shops and kiosks to meet the needs of a flourishing class of professionals and bureaucrats who resided there.[17]

Following this initial phase of continuing with the colonial model of town planning, the Indian ruling class in the twenty-first century has today entered what King describes as 'a larger network of global communications and a situation of economic dependence'.[18] Huge megacities, modelled on the world's largest megalopolises, are being built on the outskirts of the old metropolitan cities. Describing this trend as *postmetropolis*, Edward W. Soja emphasizes its characteristics: globalization of urban capital, labour, and culture, and the formation of a new hierarchy of global cities; emergence of new polarizations and inequalities; and rise of fortress cities and surveillance technologies, among others.[19] We find in north India a typical representation of this phenomenon of the *postmetropolis* in Gurgaon on the borders of New Delhi. In east India, in a similar fashion, the town planners are extending the borders of Calcutta by creating a megacity in Rajarhat to the north-east of the city (a subject which will be dealt with in detail towards the end of the book). The global economy manufactures benefits for the elite residents of these megacities. But the rest of the citizens face increasing economic stress and cultural alienation. The *postmetropolis*, as is being designed by these megacities in today's India, is a replication of the colonial model of 'dependent urbanization' in a new form, shaped by the policies and requirements of the neo-liberal global economy, described as 'neo-colonial' by Anthony King. As in the past, it is creating spatial barriers between one part of the city and another, and socio-economic and cultural divisions between one section of the citizens and others.

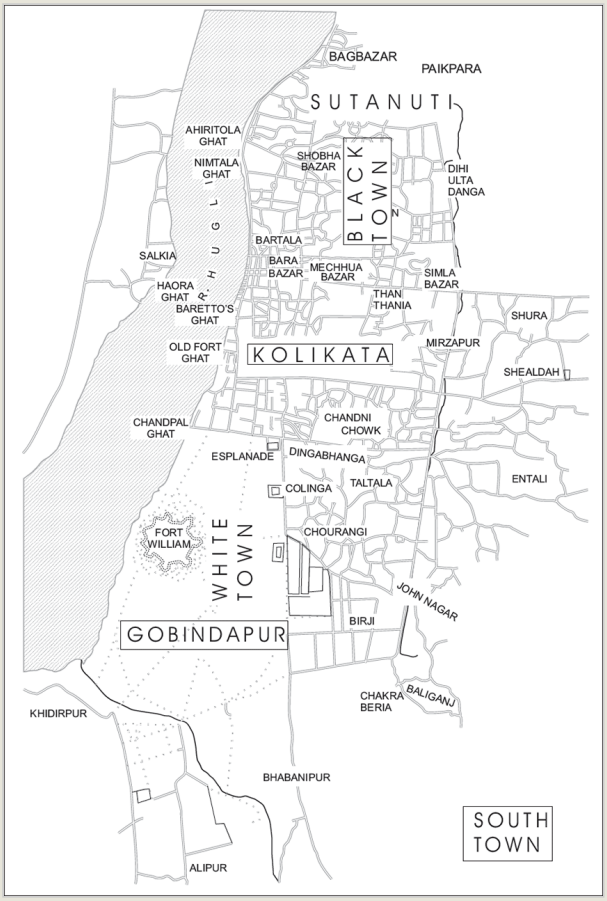
Urbanization of Calcutta and the Evolution of Its Roads

Calcutta is thus an interesting historical site, which provides social historians an opportunity of tracing the successive phases of urbanization **(p.32)** under both colonial auspices and the post-Independence regime. The route to urbanization of this area lay through roads. The roads which the colonial authorities laid down served the need of transportation of merchandize by European traders, as well as movement of their soldiers and administrators. They later became arteries in their system of governance.

But roads also acted as cultural barriers. Some of the roads were marked out for the use of only European residents. Thus, a path was constructed along the ramparts of the new Fort William that also ran along the banks of the Hooghly River on which the Fort stood. This path, known as Respondentia Road, offered the city's white residents a promenade from where to breathe fresh air. But the 'black' residents of the city were debarred from using it. The segregation was enforced by official orders like the one issued on 7 July 1821 by the British Town Major of Calcutta, a certain C.T. Higgins: 'Considerable inconvenience is experienced by the European community who resort to the respondentia from the crowds of Native workmen and Coolies who make a thoroughfare of the Walk.' Higgins then orders, 'Natives shall not in future be allowed to pass the Sluice Bridge … between the hours of 5 and 8 in the morning and 5 and 8 in the evening.'[20]

The process of urbanization of Calcutta was thus fractured from its very beginning. The colonial town planners took care to distribute the racial groups in two separate zones—in the north and the south, the former known as the Black Town, where lived the indigenous Bengali and other Indian people, and the latter as the White Town, where the British and Europeans settled. The two zones were separated by a thin strip, stretching from Bowbazar in the centre to Entally in the east, which was mainly inhabited by a mixed group of Chinese, Jews, Iranians, and Eurasians (later known as Anglo-Indians), among others (see Map 1.2).

It was through this reconstitution of a rural site and redistribution of its space on racial lines from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth **(p.33) (p.34)** century that Calcutta evolved into a city. It is necessary to add, however, that this spatial segregation of the population according to racial, social, and cultural differences did not prevent the elite of all these communities from interacting with each other through business meetings or entertainments. We thus hear of senior English administrators and their wives attending 'nautches' (performances by Indian dancing girls) and dinner parties at the palatial mansions of the Bengali aristocrats in the Black Town. Similarly in the White Town, when the British-built Chowringhee Theatre fell into bankruptcy, it was a Bengali aristocrat from the Black Town, Dwarkanath Tagore (Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather), who came to its rescue by buying it in August 1835 for a sum of 30,000 rupees.[21]



Map 1.2 The White Town and the Black Town, 1792–3, based on a map of the late eighteenth century by A. Upjohn

Source: Courtesy of the author.

Notes:

(1.) Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question* (London: Edwin Arnold, 1977).

(2.) *Wilson's Early Annals*, quoted in Ajit Kumar Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath: Samajey O Sanskrititey* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd, 2008), p. 14.

(3.) In the present phase of Calcutta's urbanization, marked by the extension of its borders through encroachment on neighbouring villages, we observe a repetition of the old colonial method of buying lands from farmers for paltry sums and developing those lands for industrial projects, and higher-income-

group residential complexes or entertainment parks that yield enormous profits to this postcolonial generation of indigenous entrepreneurs.

(4.) Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*.

(5.) Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*.

(6.) Harisadhan Mukhopadhyay, *Kolikata Sekaler O Ekaler* (Calcutta: P.M. Bagchi, 1985 [1915]), p. 458.

(7.) Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*. Describing the ouster of these villagers from Gobindapur, a later-day census report said: ‘Many thousand huts [were] thrown into the holes from whence they had been taken, to form roads and an esplanade.’ (*Census of the Town of Calcutta Taken on the 6th April, 1876* by H. Beverley, C.S. [Calcutta: printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1876].) The process of clearing villages and jungles went apace all through the eighteenth century. By the end of that century, the rural acreage of the villages had shrunk by almost half—from 2,525 acres in 1756 to 1,283 in 1794. (Re: Rama Deb Roy, *Glimpses on the History of Calcutta, 1600–1800* [Calcutta: Socio Economic Research Institute, 1985].)

(8.) *Appendix to Report on the Census of the Town of Calcutta*.

(9.) B.V. Roy, *Old Calcutta Cameos* (Calcutta: Asoka Library, 1946).

(10.) James Ranald Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta* (Calcutta Military Orphan Press, 1837), pp. 11–13. Circular Road—now divided into two parts, with the northern section renamed Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray Road and the southern portion Jagadish Chandra Bose Road—remains an important arterial link between the northern and the southern parts of the city.

(11.) *The East India Company Consultation*, quoted in Soumitra Srimani, *Anatomy of a Colonial Town: Calcutta—1756–1794* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1994).

(12.) Kipling’s poem described Calcutta as ‘the midday halt of Charnock’ (recalling the British merchant Job Charnock who set up his camp in the northern banks of the Hooghly River here in August 1690), which grew into a city ‘as the fungus sprouts chaotic from its bed’.

(13.) Quoted in P.T. Nair, ed., *Calcutta in the 19th Century* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1989), p. 513.

(14.) Anthony D. King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World Economy* (London: Routledge, 1990).

(15.) Corporation of Calcutta, *Legal Opinions and Rulings, 1900–1907* (Calcutta: Corporation Press, 1907).

(16.) King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World Economy*.

(17.) The present author remembers how in the early 1950s, a modern shopping complex called Hindusthan Mart came up on Rashbehari Avenue near its crossing with Gariahat. Unlike the Gariahat Market a few yards away, which was a traditional bazaar selling vegetables, fish, and other sundry commodities, this new mart offered a variety of luxury items and consumer goods that were earlier available only in the erstwhile White Town—the famous New Market in Dharmatalla, and the fashionable shops along Chowringhee Road and Park Street. Today, that site of Hinduthan Mart is occupied by a huge multistoreyed residential and shopping complex.

(18.) King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World Economy*.

(19.) Edward W. Soja, ‘Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis’, in *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memories*, edited by S. Westwood and J. Williams (London: Routledge, 1997).

(20.) Quoted in Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1989), p. 23.

(21.) Nair, *Calcutta in the 19th Century*; and Salil Sarkar, *Theaterer Kolkata* (Calcutta: Mitra O Ghosh Publishers, 1999). According to the historian Partha Chatterjee: ‘There never were clear rules of segregation of White and Black areas in Calcutta…. In the 19th century, there were no laws that prevented anyone from acquiring property anywhere in the city or from living anywhere.’ He adds, however, that ‘an effective system of segregation did operate’, by explaining that ‘segregation was more the result of regulations of various economic and public activities’. (Quoted by Howard Spodek in ‘City Planning in India under British Rule’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 4 [26 January 2013].)

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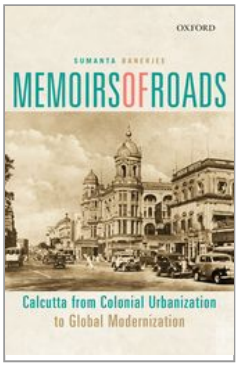

Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Modernization
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A Tale of Three Towns

Black, White, and South

Sumanta Banerjee

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Abstract and Keywords

In the early years of British rule, the fledgling city of Calcutta was divided into two zones—‘Black Town’ and ‘White Town’ (the frequently used terms found in contemporary official reports and records)—according to the racial composition of its inhabitants. Black Town comprised the northern part of the city (the site of the old village Sutanuti), which was inhabited by Indians (mainly Bengalis); while White Town was concentrated in the central part of the city (originally the village of Kolikata), where lived the British administrators and merchants, along with a variety of European entrepreneurs. Still later, in the early twentieth century, the southern part (hitherto a cluster of villages) was urbanized and incorporated into the city, which attracted a lot of Bengali middle-class professionals who settled there and created a distinct culture of their own that came to be known as ‘south Calcuttan’ and hence this part of the city got the name ‘South Town’.

Keywords: north Calcutta, central Calcutta, south Calcutta, Black Town, White Town, administrators, merchants, middle class

The Black Town: Its Population and Roads

The ‘native’ population in the Black Town in north Calcutta during the early phase of colonial urbanization (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries) generally consisted of three classes.

1. A minority of rich Bengalis who had made money as agents of the East India Company (known as *mutsuddi*s) for its commercial activities in the

early years of the eighteenth century and as the Company's revenue collectors (given the title of *dewan*s) from the tenants of the land that they owned in their villages in the later years.
2. A new generation of the Bengali middle class (like lawyers, teachers, and government employees, among others) who had gained entry into these avenues through their access to Western education in the nineteenth century.
3. The masses of labourers, both Bengalis and Indians from other parts of the country, who earned their living by providing manual labour to the two classes occupying the social hierarchy above them.

The earlier generation of commercial agents and revenue collectors built palatial mansions on the main roads of the Black Town, and garden **(p.38)** houses on the banks of the Hooghly River. One early nineteenth-century English observer, W. Hamilton, described them as 'great native families who contributed to Calcutta's splendor … (but) were of very recent origin … (from among whom) scarcely ten could be named who possessed wealth before the rise of English power, it having been accumulated under our sovereignty, chiefly in our service'.[1] By the early nineteenth century, however, their fortunes were on the decline. Hamilton pointed out at the state of their houses: 'ruinous and decayed premises, either vacant, or occupied by the remnants of wealthy families'. Explaining the decline of these old rich Bengali families of the Black Town, contemporary English observers conjectured: 'The mercantile adventurers of Calcutta had retired to spend their wealth in other quarters and … the old and indigent habitants of the place had not been able to preserve their former station.'[2]

Even after some three decades, the state of these descendants of the former Bengali grandees described above had not changed. An English missionary visiting Calcutta in the late 1860s described the houses of the rich in the Black Town in these words: 'Scattered over the city … are the family mansions of the native gentry, with their broad central courts, their pillared verandahs, and numerous rooms. Some are palaces in appearance, though surrounded by filthy drains; others are badly out of repair, their walls eaten with salt petre, their courts full of cast-away furniture and heaps of rubbish, or overgrown with huge weeds; and threatening to tumble into ruins.'[3]

It is no wonder that this English visitor found the houses of the 'native gentry' in such a dilapidated condition. By the mid-nineteenth century, these Bengali families of the 'native gentry', which had amassed fortunes in the eighteenth century through deals with the East India Company, had already lost their wealth and power. First, these members of an informal sector were no longer of any use to the colonial administrative system that had succeeded the East India Company and had laid down formal rules for both commercial and **(p.39)** administrative functions. The new rulers had trained functionaries from among a

new generation of Bengalis (through their schools and colleges) to man their commercial institutions as clerks, and administer the rural economy as junior officials (entrusted with the task of collecting revenue and looking after law and order). Second, the descendants of the eighteenth-century Bengali grandees themselves were in no position to retain their status in the face of new challenges. They were ill-qualified to fit into the new capitalist system. Most of them dissipated the wealth accumulated by their forefathers through an inherited extravagant feudal lifestyle (for example, spending their money on lavish parties, maintaining mistresses, or gambling on horse races). By the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, they were reduced to penury, their mansions looking like moth-eaten structures.

But a new generation of the Bengali middle class (referred to above as functionaries trained by the colonial authorities) was growing up in the Black Town during this period. They came from amongst the descendants of these old families, as well as new immigrants from outlying areas. Some of the former continued to live in the dingy rooms of the mansions of their ancestors, some in the newly built houses in the lanes and alleys behind these mansions. They belonged to two groups. One consisted of the traditional commercial or artisan caste families, like *subarnabanik*s (goldsmiths), *gandhabanik*s (dealers in spices), and *tantubau*s (engaged in weaving and selling textile), who were quite prosperous in eighteenth-century Bengal. In mid-nineteenth-century Calcutta, the second or third generations of these *subarnabanik*s and *gandhabanik*s were still able to retain their position through banking and commerce. The other group was comprised of the descendants of upper-caste Brahmin and Kayastha zamindars. Bereft of their old estates, the second and third generations of these families drifted into the new professions that were opened up by the colonial administrative system. As mentioned earlier, they went through an educational **(p.40)** system that trained them as functionaries to serve the administration and its different adjuncts—commercial, judicial, medical, and engineering, among others. They entered professions like law, medicine, engineering, education, accountancy, and so on.[4] They were also recruited by the administration as clerks and petty bureaucrats to man the administration at the lower levels. These middle-class professionals and government employees formed the class that was described by the English rulers as ‘babu’—a rather ambiguous term in colonial discourse, which was mostly used in a pejorative sense by the British to describe the sloppy and grovelling habits of the Bengali clerks, and yet quite often as a respectable prefix for Bengali intellectuals (for example, Babu Bankim Chandra Chatterjee).

How did these ‘babus’ live in the lanes and by-lanes behind the main roads in the Black Town of the nineteenth century? We come across a meticulously written description of the houses that they built by a perceptive contemporary European observer, who found them

> uniformly built in the form of a hollow square, with an area of 50 to 100 feet each way, which on the occasion of Hindoo festivals, is covered over, and when well lighted up, looks very handsome. The house itself is seldom of more than two stories, the lower portion, on three sides of it, being used only for store-rooms, or for domestics; on the remaining side, and that always the northern one, is to be found the Thakur Ghar, or abode of the Hindoo Gods; this is always finished with care, and when the owner is wealthy, the lustres contained in this sacred apartment are of considerable value. Above stairs are the public apartments, with verandahs, always inwards; these are generally long narrow slips, containing a profusion of lustres and wall lights, altogether affording but a mean view to an European. Jutting out from this main building are situated the accommodations allotted to the females, and family; they consist of smaller hollow squares, with petty verandahs opening inwards, and some houses have two or three sets of these zunnanahs, with one or more tanks attached, but which are generally kept in a very neglected state.[5]

(p.41) The Underbelly of the Black Town

But the majority of the inhabitants of Calcutta's Black Town were migrants from villages who had come to the city looking for livelihood. They carved out little pathways from the main roads, on the sides of which they set up their huts. They lived a ghetto-type existence, instilling their traditional rural living style and customs within the newly mushroomed crowded bazaars and hutments in the narrow lanes of Calcutta. In these alleys, which twisted away from the original arterial roads (Chitpur running from north to south and Bagbazar from west to east in the north), they built slums of mud huts with thatched roofs, living cheek by jowl with the middle-class homes of the 'babus', whom they served as domestic helps, local artisans, or in any other similar manual occupational role.

Neither the main roads in the Black Town (where stood the mansions of the rich Bengalis), nor the streets and lanes behind them (where the poor lived), were in any usable shape. Writing in 1836, Lieutenant Abercrombie, who held office as Superintendent of Conservancy, described the abominable road conditions in the northern part of the city: 'There are at present no effectual means in use for putting the streets into a proper state of cleanliness and preserving them in such. Dust, rubbish and all kinds of dirt are thrown into the streets ad libitum from every house, to be picked up as may be when the carts … (only about 300 carts to serve the whole town) may happen to come round.' The roads were rendered even worse by the drainage system. The only drains were deep open ditches running alongside the roads, which were always full of filth and stinking matter. Describing the drains in the Black Town, Lieutenant Abercrombie said: 'They were unpaved.… In some places the bottom of the drain was nearly 2 ft. below its supposed out-let, so that the deposit of filth, consisting chiefly of the

contents of privies and other matters in various stages of decomposition, gave out the most offensive stench when disturbed for removal.'[6] **(p.42)**

A vivid description of the sanitary conditions in the Black Town is available from another contemporary account, which draws our attention to the role of 'mehtars' or scavengers in cleaning the roads:

> The larger houses possessed private privies, while the poorer classes, who lived in huts, sometimes shared one privy between four or five huts, and sometimes resorted to the 'mehtar-tatties,' or public necessaries, which instead of being municipal property, were built and managed by private enterprises, fees being charged for their use.... The night soil, collected from private privies by mehtars, who were paid fees by the occupiers of the premises was conveyed to depots called 'tollah mehtars' depots,' which were situated at convenient centres. It was then removed to the night-soil ghat on the river bank near the Mint, carried downstream in boats hired by the Municipality on the contract system, and thrown into the river.[7]

Some thirty years after Abercrombie's report, the first census of Calcutta was carried out in 1866 by a committee headed by V.H. Schalch. It estimated that there were 438 roads and lanes in Calcutta, out of which 253 were in the Black Town with a length of 3,50,083 feet. They were so narrow, Schalch pointed out, that traffic could not move smoothly. Besides, he warned, that the concentration of combustible industries like jute mills, shops selling paints, oil mills, and soap manufacturing units along these roads and lanes posed a danger to the citizens, as no fire engine could enter these alleys, and no tanks or ponds were situated nearby to make water available.[8] A British traveller passing through Calcutta during that period gives a vivid description of the living style and conditions of the Bengali citizens of the Black Town, which occupied nearly 6 square miles of the entire city (then comprising 8 square miles):

> The streets, roads, and lanes are narrow, and are overshadowed by the lofty walls and verandahs of straggling family dwellings.... All the great roads and streets, destitute of pavements, are lined with shops, which are innocent of glass fronts and windows; and which exhibit, without **(p.43)** protection from dust, piles of brass vessels, bundles of slippers and shoes, gorgeous tin lanterns, bales of cloth, mats, stool and cane chairs; vast piles of red pottery, pitchers, cups and cooking pots; leaf umbrellas; and hillocks of bamboos; posts for houses, small tiles, and straw.[9]

As for the domestic existence of these inhabitants of the underbelly of the Black Town, the British traveller provides us with an insight into their living style and habits. Describing the pressure on urban space, he observed: 'So precious has space become in recent years, that almost all vacant land outside the gardens of the better houses has been covered with common huts. Of these the city now

contains over sixty thousand. Formerly they were made of light materials, were walled with mats, and thatched with leaves or straw.' But the great fires which burned three thousand of them every year led to the implementation of a public law that required them to be roofed with tiles. How did these inhabitants of the newly refurbished huts live? To quote the British traveller: 'Though more substantial in make, they are huts still. Most of them consist of but a single room, and contains a bed-stead, a huge chest, a lamp or two, bamboo or glass oil bottles, and a miscellaneous collection of pots and pans.'[10]

The state of the Black Town roads and lanes deteriorated further over the next two decades. A report prepared by the Health Officer of the Calcutta Corporation in 1887 described in grim colours the 'close, narrow and ill-ventilated streets … in the northern and native portion of the town'. The official pointed out that localities which were crowded fifty years ago had become still more densely crowded because of new buildings which had been erected during this period. As a result, the air was polluted, for the purification of which 'the sweeping force of a storm is required to penetrate into the numerous narrow lanes, passages, nooks, crevices and gullies which intersect the more crowded districts'.[11]

The report also described the impact of such a congested atmosphere on the health of those inhabiting these 'nooks, crevices and gullies'. **(p.44)** They suffered more in terms of mortality rates compared to the citizens of the White Town. While the mean death rate in the European quarter was 14.6, in the Black Town it was 28–35. Explaining the high mortality rates, a Bengali physician who treated patients in the Black Town slums attributed them to 'bad hygienic conditions under which the poor sufferers live in ill-ventilated over-crowded rooms, coupled with the insanitary conditions … where the privies open on the road side admitting the free admixture of the sewer gas with the atmosphere already surcharged with the effluvia emanating from the … deposit of house refuse; the contamination of well water with suspended sewage'.[12] Epidemics were quick to break out and spread to the rest of the city from these slums.

Calcutta's Slum-Dwellers—as Agencies and Victims of Urbanization

The nineteenth-century report of the living conditions of the slum-dwellers described earlier helps us to enter their habitat and examine the hitherto neglected role of these inhabitants of the city's underbelly in the urbanization of Calcutta. Slums had been a part of the city's roads from the beginning. James Ranald Martin described them as huts where the mass of labouring classes lived, 'the walls of which are of mud, or of matted reed or bamboo, roofed with straw or tiles, according to the means of the occupant … they are uniformly placed on the bare ground or on damp mud, but little raised, which continually emits injurious exhalations'. In 1822 (the period about which Martin was writing), out of the 67,519 premises in Calcutta, 37,497 (more than half) were straw huts.[13]

Those who inhabited them sustained Calcutta's civic infrastructure by providing its upper-class residents with roadside facilities like transport (by horse-driven carriages, manually carried palanquins, and later, hand-pulled rickshaws) and eateries, and in the role of domestic helps, **(p.45)** cooks, washermen, tailors, and porters, among others. Some of these bustee dwellers were also engaged as manual labourers in certain types of small-scale industries that grew to meet the growing needs of the urban population. The municipal authorities, however, frowned upon these mushrooming industries and termed them 'dangerous and offensive trades', since they posed hazards to the habitations amidst which they cropped up. Among such trades, they listed straw depots, potteries, tanneries, brick kilns, wood depots, dyeing houses, coal depots, soap manufacturers, oil boiling, houses for melting tallow, places for drying fish, and saltpetre manufactories. 'Many of these places of business', they warned, 'are mere large sheds, with mud walls and tiled roofs … in the midst of densely populated clusters of huts, where one spark at the hot season of the year may set the whole in a flame, and cause immense destruction.'[14]

The danger of such conflagration was not confined to the Black Town. There were slums in the White Town also, which were inhabited by the Indian servants of the European residents. We come across a Bengali newspaper report of a fire that broke out in 'Bamun Bustee' in the neighbourhood of Theatre Road on 27 March 1821, which started from a hut occupied by a servant of a certain Mr George Watt, and spread fast.[15]

Slums or bustees, therefore, always posed a threat—both as sources of epidemics and conflagration. Yet, they were accepted as a necessary evil by both citizens and the authorities, since they acted as an agency for urbanization by housing the masses of labourers who manned the city's network of civic facilities. We cannot, however, deny the fact that slums sprang up because of the absence of any humanitarian concern on the part of the civic authorities for the residential requirements of these manual workers. They were forced to build little mud huts for themselves, a conglomeration of which constituted a bustee. According to the 1876 Census of Calcutta, out of the 150-odd bustees, some 130 were situated in the Black Town in the north alone, while the remaining spread over the central part and the White Town in the south. **(p.46)**

But those who built their homes in the bustees were not owners of these plots where they built up their shacks. These plots belonged to landlords (like the rich Bengali residents of the Black Town, and the European settlers in the White Town, or middle-class traders and businessmen) who rented out their land in small plots to different tenants for building purposes. Neither the Bengali nor the white landlords were concerned about the well-being of the residents of their slums as long as their rents were duly collected. The rich and middle-class households did not care either, as long as these slum-dwellers continued to serve them as their domestic helps. In the absence of any humanitarian concern on the

part of the civic authorities for the residential requirements of these manual workers, they were forced to build little mud huts for themselves. Besides suffering from such existential problems, the bustee dwellers were also denied political rights. Till the early twentieth century, neither the hut owner nor its occupant was entitled to vote in municipality elections.

Meanwhile, the colonial authorities needed to give the fragmented city an appearance of coherence and bring it under a centralized system of town planning. In their bid to expand the road network and beautify the city, it was essential, therefore, to clear the roads of the bustees. The slums thus became a site of tensions between the citizens' need for the slum-dwellers on the one hand, and the municipal authorities' need to get rid of them on the other.

From the 1860s onwards, municipal administrators began to systematically demolish slums to make way for new structures. In 1868, for instance, a sprawling bustee on Chitpur Road was pulled down, and a garden was built on the spot costing 3,00,000 rupees, which was named Beadon Square (which still exists) in the name of the then British governor general of India, Lord Beadon. A variety of flowers were planted in the garden, which used to be illuminated in the evening.[16] One might wonder why the white rulers chose this particular site in the Black Town to build a garden; there could have been several reasons. **(p. 47)**

First, the British rulers were seriously concerned about their own physical health, and the dangers of contamination from the Black Town, which was perceived as a den of all diseases, from where the northern wind blew and infected the White Town in the south. They suffered from what a modern-day historian describes as 'sanitation syndrome'—a term used with reference to colonial planning in South Africa.[17] As Anthony D. King points out in his analysis of urban planning under colonial regime: 'The overriding, even obsessive concern with "health" … was … taken as the driving force behind planning in all colonial territories. The creation of physically "healthy" environments, defined according to the cultural criteria of the metropolitan power, became a major objective.'[18] Thus, a 'physicalist' strategy based on sheer rearrangement of space and dispersal of its inhabitants to sanitize the environment was formulated by the Calcutta municipal authorities to bypass problems that were essentially economic, social, and political. The demolition of a crowded slum and the creation of an open-air garden in its place fitted well into this strategy of purifying the Black Town. In fact, as early as 1836, Lieutenant Abercrombie, the then Superintendent of Conservancy for Calcutta, recommended the formation of streets that could lead to the opening up of crowded localities and secure 'free ventilation' so that the wind which blew from the Black Town in the north could be detoxicated. Besides, the policy to reduce the congestion in the northern part of the town was also motivated by the British rulers' need to keep

their native subjects in a healthier form. If they were reduced to physical wrecks, who would man the services of the colonial rulers?

Second, environmental reforms like setting up of gardens and naming them after white rulers in the heart of the Black Town served the twin objectives of stamping the space with symbols of colonial authority, and also pleasing the upwardly mobile Bengali professionals and middle-class inhabitants by offering them a space for leisure. Such ‘strategic beautification’ of portions of the Black Town allowed its native **(p.48)** residents to relax in open air within the precincts of their own territory, and debarred them from invading the promenades in the White Town like the Eden Gardens and the strand along the Hooghly River.[19]

Among other areas in the Black Town where the slum population was affected by road-building in the 1880s, were Jorasanko, where bustees were razed to make way for the creation of several streets; Kolutola, where municipal authorities took possession of a large bustee to evict their dwellers in order to construct a hospital on that site; and Muchipara, where the site of a bustee was taken over to construct a building to house a social institution. In the White Town, Duncan’s bustee, which was situated in Wood Street, was pulled down to build the office of the Surveyor General. This meant the second displacement for its inhabitants who, after having been ousted from Gobindapur (due to the construction of Fort William there, as mentioned earlier), had been rehabilitated in this bustee.[20]

By the turn of the twentieth century, more bustees had been demolished, partly with the consent of their upper-class Bengali owners, who were compensated with money for the loss of their regular income from the rents paid by their tenants who inhabited the bustees. An official report describes how these owners removed all huts in ‘Natherbagan bustee … Soortibagan bustee ... Tantibagan bustee’, where ‘the owners … have removed all the huts and constructed masonry buildings’.[21] A few years later, the Calcutta Corporation was empowered with the right to remove bustees for the purpose of building or widening roads, without payment of any compensation whatsoever to the owners.[22]

The bustee-dwellers were thus a fluid stream of the city’s population—compelled to move constantly from one habitat to another, ousted from a newly developed road to some lane that still awaited reconstruction. They were victims of the ever-changing plans of municipal authorities. Yet, they remained a permanent adjunct to the city—invariably cropping up behind the main roads and the houses of upper- and middle-class families that had to depend on their labour.

(p.49) Middle Classes of the Black Town

We have earlier described the composition of the Black Town’s Bengali upper- and middle-class inhabitants in the nineteenth century consisting of descendants of the old families of commercial and administrative agents of the East India

Company and the new class of professionals like advocates, teachers, medical practitioners, and bureaucrats and clerks in the administrative hierarchy. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, they were all bundled up in the stereotype of ‘babus’ by the contemporary European observers. They were denigrated in the Kiplinesque style, in the contemporary accounts by Englishmen in newspapers and other writings. A typical illustration is a snippet from a travelogue by an Englishman in the early twentieth century. He begins by admitting that he has ‘followed in Kipling’s footsteps, and … smelt the Big Stink of which he wrote so geographically’. He then proceeds to describe the lifestyle of the ‘babu’ who works ‘all day in his two-foot section of desk behind the brass rails of a busy bank or office … [and] is wide awake at night enjoying himself in the haunts of his class’. The haunt is the red-light area in Upper Chitpore (‘perhaps the most Indian of Calcutta’s streets’), where ‘babus of all shapes and sizes … from the long and lanky to the squat figure that looks like a Crème de Menthe bottle’ congregated.

The English visitor then sums up: ‘Ninety percent or more of the clerks in Calcutta thus disport themselves in the charms of femininity, working by day, revelling by night, and rearing families in their spare time.’[23]

This typical colonial view of the Bengali middle class of the Black Town fails, as usual, to look deeper under the surface. At the time when this Englishman was sneering at ‘babus’, a mood of discontent and protest against colonial rule was also simmering among the same ‘babu’ class. While some among them did indulge in the hedonistic lifestyle described above, others were organizing public meetings to demand political rights within the existing system; some among them even **(p.50)** going a step further by resorting to armed resistance to put an end to the colonial system altogether.

In fact, the educated Bengali middle class of the Black Town, which was a product of the colonial system, also bred within its womb the forces that challenged the system. One of the ironies of a hegemonist English educational system (that was introduced in the Black Town in the nineteenth century by the colonial rulers to serve their interests) was that while creating a subservient class of Bengali clerks, petty bureaucrats, and professionals, it unwittingly led to the growth of a subversionist grouping within the same class that rebelled against the colonial powers. Thus, in the Black Town, institutions like the Hindu College (a joint endeavour by English colonial educationalists and Bengali upper-class social reformers) produced a generation of intellectual dissidents in the early nineteenth century (for example, the Young Bengal group), who can be described as the precursors of the next generation of Bengali nationalist politicians, who in the twentieth century emerged as a force to challenge the colonial rulers. Educated in the values of Western Enlightenment that were spread through this system, they questioned the credibility of colonial power in the terms of a discourse that was set by that power itself. These Bengali middle-

class residents of the Black Town constituted the nationalist elements—both those who sought to gain independence through constitutional means and others who resorted to armed struggle.

It was in the streets and halls of the Black Town that public rallies and meetings were held against draconian laws that imposed censorship and violated political rights, Bengali plays were staged that lampooned the city's colonial administrators, and secret revolutionary groups hatched plots to overthrow the British regime by armed onslaught.

Rise of the White Town

As mentioned earlier, from the mid-eighteenth century, the European residents began to shift from the northern wing of the town, Sutanuti, **(p.51)** following Siraj-ud-dowlah's attack. They sought accommodation in Gobindapur in the south-west, where they also felt more secure due to the construction of the new Fort William. But Gobindapur alone was not spacious enough for them. As one latter-day historian of Calcutta was to describe their problems,

> The English with their shops, shipping servants and dependents, their banians, brokers and traders, who were most rapidly increasing in number, lay scattered, in spite of concentration of the factors and soldiers in and around Fort William, over the whole of this area in straggling houses and boat … it was becoming more and more difficult to deal with them in the best interests of the Company.[24]

Besides, the existing town was attracting a new group of Europeans. Another modern historian of Calcutta points out that the success of the English in the Battle of Plassey encouraged 'a growing number of unlicensed Englishmen … to find their way to Bengal.… Spurred by the examples of the Nabobs [the first generation of East India Company merchants and administrators who made fortunes in India and returned to England where they flaunted their wealth in the early 18th century] more and more began to reach Bengal'.[25] These 'unlicensed Englishmen' consisted of sailors who jumped ships, soldiers who deserted the army, wanted criminals who escaped from London, and a variety of adventurers who flocked to this town seeking ways to make fortunes. The English settlement was bursting at its seams.

The East India Company, therefore, had to extend its territory beyond the prevailing borders. As luck would have it, their old patron, the Moghul prince Farrukshiyar (who granted them the permission to buy the three villages of Sutanuti, Kolikata, and Gobindapur in 1698), captured the Moghul throne in Delhi in 1713. The East India Company approached him for permission to expand their territory by buying villages neighbouring their old settlement in Calcutta. In 1717, Farrukshiyar granted them the right to buy thirty-eight villages in and around Calcutta. But the local zamindars of these villages refused to sell them.[26] Over the next **(p.52)** decades, however, the Company got

possession of the villages through devious means. It employed its agents and brokers to twist the hands of these zamindars and make them concede. According to a latter-day British official—Mr Bolts, the Collector of Calcutta—these servants and brokers of the Company ‘realized whatever rents and profits they could get, and omitted to pay the Government revenue, which however, was exacted from the old, but dispossessed zamindars.’[27]

Among these villages were Chourungi, Birji, and Kalimba (or Kalinga) in the south-eastern part of the area. The English and European settlers (mainly administrators and traders) encroached upon them and carved out a space for their own exclusive use. In this new phase of the urbanization of these villages in the early eighteenth century, these European settlers built houses and roads that suited their movements and convenience. Thus, a new urban spatial structure was constructed through the rearrangement of public and private spaces, and connectivity and accessibility were made possible by the creation of roads and lanes. Very soon, these European settlements, which stretched from the neighbourhood of Fort William in the west to the Chowrungi-Birji area of the east, became institutionalized as a separate enclave known as the White Town.

The European population carved out the White Town as their own exclusive zone, where they implanted town planning theory, ideology, and professional knowledge, which they borrowed from the metropolitan centre of London in Britain. In these enclaves, they constructed wide roads and avenues, built British-type cottages, and laid out gardens experimenting with tropical flora.

The development of the urban infrastructure—roads and houses—of the White Town can be traced from contemporary accounts. One of the earliest such accounts is that of a European painter called William Hodges, who visited Calcutta in the 1780s and described the White Town in the following words:

> The streets are broad: the line of buildings surrounding two sides of the esplanade of the fort, is magnificent; and it adds greatly to the superb **(p. 53)** appearance, that the houses are detached from each other, and insulated in a great space. The buildings are all on a large scale, from the necessity of having a free circulation of air.… The general approach to the houses is by a flight of steps, with great projecting porticoes, or surrounded by colonnades or arcades, which gave them the appearance of Grecian Temples.[28]

The Grecian architectural façade of houses and gardens in the domestic sphere, and wide roads and promenades in the public sphere, remained a model of living style also for later generations of European residents of the White Town. In the 1830s, an English observer described their houses as marked by a ‘style of building (which) is Grecian, ornamented with spacious verandahs, the pillars of which are generally too lofty to afford much protection from the sun’s rays’. He

added: ‘Each house has a piece of garden around, which gives to this quarter [European] … a great advantage in point of airiness.’[29] Some thirty years later, we find from another contemporary report the following description of the White Town:

> The English quarter occupies the south end of the city. Here a beautiful plain, a mile and a half long goes down to the water’s edge, having Fort William in the centre, on the river bank.… On its inner sides the plain is bordered with the stately houses of the English, with their white walls, broad, open verandahs, and green Venetian shutters.… On the east side are the numerous English homes of ‘Chowringhee,’ always increasing both in number and in their rents.[30]

The ‘beautiful plain’ is what came to be known as the Maidan—the lungs of the city. Once a deep jungle, it was later cleared (in 1830–40) and turned into a pasture and grazing ground. Still later, the British administrators began to develop the stretch as an open space for the recreation of white citizens by planting trees and creating spots of quiet retreat—on the lines of Hyde Park and similar English sites of open-air exercise and leisure. By the 1860s, it had been given recognition in official records as the Maidan, and suggestions were being made for **(p.54)** the ‘improvement of the Maidan … [since] the increase of European population demands corresponding means to provide for the recreation of the community.’[31]

Differing Patterns in the Use of Space

The contrast between the Black Town and the White Town boils down to the basic difference in the organization of public and private space in the two towns. It is a contrast between a concept of habitats and living style in an indigenous pre-industrial society on the one hand, and a newly introduced colonial concept of urban planning imposed on that society on the other. In the encounter between the two, those inhabiting the indigenous conceptual framework were torn by tensions between their traditional rural roots and the newly emerging urban compulsions of existential survival in Calcutta, where they had emigrated.

The growth and development of the Black Town reflected these tensions. The Bengali landlords and other residents who settled here in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries allowed it to develop along the old pattern of villages from where they had emigrated. As in their villages, where people huddled together in huts rubbing shoulders with each other, sharing common concerns, in north Calcutta too in the early days of its growth, houses cropped up side by side, often without any boundary wall. Again, following the old joint-family system, a single building accommodated numerous wings of the owner’s extended family. This cluttered-up native housing pattern, which persisted all through the nineteenth century in the Black Town, posed a challenge to British colonial town planning, which lay stress on the separation of individual

residential units—as followed in the White Town with its European bungalows detached from each other by patches of empty space. The problem was posed in vivid terms by a British official, H. Beverley, who while carrying out an on-the-spot survey of the Black Town in 1876, observed: **(p.55)**

> House accommodation is too limited and expensive to allow of many families among the poor classes thus enjoying a whole baree (house) to themselves; far more frequently we find each separate room in the homestead occupied by a distinct family. The rooms may be detached or not; they may have access to the street by separate entrances or by a common door. In some cases there are perhaps shops outside facing the street, bearing distinct assessment numbers, though all under the same roof. Was such a baree to be counted as one or more houses?[32]

Following the rural pattern of allotting separate space to occupational groups and castes, the Bengali landlords in the Black Town settled artisans, potters, fishermen, and similar communities in respective slots in the urban topography. We thus find areas in north Calcutta carrying names like Dorjipara (named after tailors), Kumortuli (inhabited by potters), and Jeleypara (occupied by fishermen who steered across the neighbouring Hooghly river to catch fish). As in their old villages, these various areas came to be connected by lanes and alleys winding through the clusters of mud huts of the poorer classes and the brick-built houses of the upper classes. As in the villages again, bazaars were situated in certain corners of the town—like Lala Baboo’s Bazaar on Chitpore Road or Simla Bazaar on Maniktala Street. The traders operated from makeshift stalls, selling fruits, vegetables, spices, and fish among other things, which they often produced in their own farms in the neighbouring villages, or manufactured in their own homes (like the spice merchants), or gathered from their own occupational sources (like the fishermen). The traditional direct relationship between the producer and the consumer that characterized rural market economy persisted in the Black Town in the old times.

Bengali owners of some of these traditional bazaars of the Black Town faced a crisis when English administrators and entrepreneurs encroached upon their commercial space on the borders of the Black and White Towns in central Calcutta towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, the descendants of the famous businessman Motilal Sheel, who owned an old bazaar in the Chowringhee–Dharmatala area, **(p.56)** protested when in 1873 the British administrators decided to build a modern market next to it, named after their patron, Sir Stuart Hogg, who was the city’s commissioner of police as well as its municipal commissioner. The Sheel family, however, agreed to give up their claims to the commercial space by accepting 60,000 rupees as compensation from the British administrators.[33]

Hogg Market (known today as New Market) and similar other markets that came up in the White Town stood in sharp contrast with the bazaars of the contemporary Black Town. In these new markets, a different class of indigenous retailers rented well-structured shops, bought goods from the wholesale market in north Calcutta, and sold them to their main clients, the European residents. Quite a number of European and Jewish traders also set up their shops in Hogg Market, some of which still survive.

Calcutta Roads as Registers of Changing Modes of Transport

Next to housing and markets, transport is a major requirement of the residents of a city. Roads cannot live without transport. The various stages of road development in Calcutta are bound up with the different phases of transport that operated on the roads—ranging from animal-driven carts to vehicular traffic.

In rural Bengal, bullock carts were the traditional mode of transport, both for the movement of freight and travellers. The rich used palanquins carried by human bearers. For faster travelling, the *paik*s and *barkandaz*es (armed mercenaries) of the zamindars rode horses. In the urban mileu of Calcutta in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, palanquins and horse-driven carriages were used by the upper-class Bengalis in the Black Town and the Europeans in the White Town. The European painter F. Balthazar Solvyns, visiting Calcutta in the late eighteenth century, described the palanquin as well constructed, with **(p.57)** lanterns, and borne by four bearers whose movements were so easy that 'they are scarcely felt by the person in the palanquin, though they are at the same time very rapid and get over a great deal of ground in a short time'.[34] The bearers kept shifting the palanquin—one group succeeded by another on a long stretch. A contemporary Englishwoman, Sophia Goldbourne, narrating her journey to the promenade of Esplanade in Calcutta, wrote: 'Swiftly did we pass along; for it seems these palanquin-bearers (with proper relays …) are so expert that in defiance of the heat, etc. they go at the rate of from nine to twelve miles per hour.'[35] But the common citizens could not afford palanquins. As one latter-day historian of Calcutta observed:

> Travelling by dawk palki (palanquin) continued well up to the 19th century, but for people of limited means the cost was prohibitive and they had to avail of the ubiquitous bullock-cart, with a thatch or covering of split bamboos and cloth and a layer of straw inside to serve as a 'shock absorber' against the jerks and jolts incidental to badly kept roads.[36]

The next important mode of transport was the hackney carriage. A mid-nineteenth-century official report describes three types of such carriages in Calcutta: (*a*) four-wheeled carriage on springs, drawn by two horses; (*b*) a similar carriage drawn by one horse or a pair of ponies; and (*c*) a two-wheeled carriage without springs.[37] Although palanquins gradually disappeared from the

roads of Calcutta, horse-driven carriages continued to operate till the twentieth century.

The transition from palanquins and horse-driven carriages to trams, railways, and motor cars led to the redrawing and resurfacing of roads into suitable avenues for carrying these mechanized modes of transport. The surfaces of Calcutta's roads were sliced into strips through the laying down of railway and tramway tracks that cut across the city, connecting its different corners. In 1867, the administration built a railway line that ran from Theatre Road in the White Town to Bagbazar in the Black Town in the north, to collect and carry the refuse of the residential areas all along the route, and then move **(p.58)** further towards the eastern outskirts of Calcutta in Dhapa, in order to dump the refuse into the swamps there. The train that trudged along this railway line through the middle of the city was known in those days as the 'Dhapa Mail'. Still later, in 1873, the Calcutta Corporation began experimenting with the tramways by laying down a line that was 12,700 feet in length, which was to be mainly used for the removal of seeds and jute from the Sealdah Railway Station to the warehouses in the Black Town, where they would be stored by wholesale merchants. This was, however, a rather brief experiment, since under pressures from a section of the administration (which felt that it was working at a dead loss), it was discontinued.[38] But the tramways were revived soon with the introduction of horse-driven trams for passengers along the old tramway line, and were turned later into an electricity-driven popular means of transport all over Calcutta. Meanwhile, the appearance of the automobile on Calcutta's roads posed a new challenge to the existing road system. Motor cars were imported from abroad for private use by the richer classes and heavy trucks were used for transporting freight.[39]

All these various stages of mechanization of transport were accompanied by administrative efforts to strengthen the road surface to suit the new kinds of traffic. But during this period (from the end of the nineteenth century till the beginning of the twentieth) road-building in Calcutta became a contested terrain between various competing parties—British officials of the Calcutta municipality, British road engineers, and British contractors. It became a site of debate and conflict among these members of the colonial ruling elite, on issues like administrative priorities, commercial profits, technological innovations, and health concerns, among others. First, to cut down costs, the British engineers suggested different technologies ranging from the use of asphalt macadam to cement concrete.

But the most curious technology was mooted by a British contractor firm called Messrs Gladston Wyllie. It had investments in logging **(p.59)** operations, and in order to profit from the wood thus extracted from forests, it submitted a proposal to the municipal authorities in 1902–3 to pave the city roads with wooden planks that had a cement covering. But two other Englishmen, the chief

engineer and the health officer of the Calcutta Corporation, raised objections. They pointed out that a similar experiment had been earlier carried out on some London roads, and it had been found that in summer the wooden planks rotted and gave out an offensive smell, as a result of which those roads had to be washed with deodorant! In Calcutta, what with the summer heat, such wooden roads would give out an even worse stink![40]

‘Tyrannies of the Road’

Finally, the British administration abandoned all other experiments, and settled for tar macadam and cement concrete. But it decided to be selective in both the construction and maintenance of roads. The roads in the White Town—in the central and southern parts—which housed the British administrative and commercial headquarters and residences of white citizens—were well laid, cleaned and watered every day, and repaired every year. The roads in the Black Town in the north suffered stepmotherly treatment. Local residents complained about the discrimination, as evident from a contemporary Bengali newspaper editorial in the late 1850s, describing the plight of pedestrians there at the onset of the monsoon: ‘Every road is choked with slush ... yet there is no sign of repairing the roads.... Just because we are Bengalis, the roads in our neighbourhoods have to remain in disrepair.’[41] Even after almost two decades, the extent of road-building in the two areas remained skewed in favour of the White Town. A municipality report of 1873 indicates that while in the southern division (that is, the White Town) stone layers for paving the roads covered about 1,00,000 cubic feet, in the northern division (the Black Town) they covered about 80,000 cubic feet only, although the residential area in the north was larger than that it was in the south.[42] In the **(p.60)** same year, a letter that appeared in a Bengali newspaper described the plight of a pedestrian returning home through a road in the Black Town:

> It is evening and it is drizzling.... But the road has already become a mud puddle, as if a sweetmeat seller had poured all his rotten curd on a plate.... The pavements are also bumpy and slippery.... Further down, a sewerage pipe has burst ... so you have to take a diversion.... But there again, you find that there is some problem with the pavement gas light posts.... So, the gas company labourers are digging up the road.

The letter ends with an appeal to the Calcutta Municipality: ‘Please, please ... find some means to reduce the tyrannies of the road.’[43]

Apart from the poor maintenance of the surface of the roads, the underground drainage and sewerage system also created problems (more dangerous than the frequent bursting of the pipes, as described in the above letter). Lack of proper supervision of the numerous details of the drainage machinery, beginning from its construction, laying, trapping ventilation, flushing, and so forth, often left it vulnerable to the leakage of sewer gas. A late nineteenth-century English health

officer of the Calcutta Corporation described his personal experience during one of his inspections: ‘I have found the water pipe passing through a sewer manhole, or a gully-pit, or through a cess pit, and the joint leaking. The effect, when the water pressure is taken off in the afternoon or night, is to draw drain gas, sometimes sewer gas into the pipes.’[44]

Roads as Sites of Protest by Transporters

All through the history of transportation in Calcutta, roads had been the arena of rebellion by the very agents of transport—from the palanquin-bearers and horse-chariot drivers of the nineteenth century to the tramway workers of the twentieth century. One of the earliest of such protest demonstrations was held in 1827 by the palanquin-bearers of Calcutta, who were mainly Oriya-speaking immigrants. It was a unique form of protest. Instead of using the road for their protest, they boycotted **(p.61)** it. They refused to ply their vehicles on the roads. They protested against the new rates announced by the government, fixing their charges for carrying passengers as ‘fourteen annas [a little less than a rupee] for a fourteen-hour day according to the English clock’. Explaining their reason for rejecting the new rates, a contemporary Bengali newspaper said: ‘The bearers do not have watches, and the people they carry have them … and since the word of the gentry is more respected than that of the plebeians … the livelihood of the palanquin bearers is in jeopardy.’ The newspaper reporter then added: ‘There are many among the respected gentry who move around for one and a half hours or more, and pay only for an hour by showing their watches, and the poor bearers cannot say anything in protest.’[45] The next such boycott of roads was in February 1851, when the drivers of bullock carts (the chief means of carrying freight in those days) went on strike against a proposed tax. They succeeded in getting it withdrawn. Noting their success, the editor of a contemporary Bengali newspaper grumbled: ‘Had I known this before, I would have left the job of an editor and become a bullock-cart driver, and could have become the object of royal favour!’[46] In 1864 again, the horse-carriage drivers threatened a strike against the Hackney Carriage Act that was passed that year, requiring the drivers to obtain licences and restricting the speed of their vehicles and the number of passengers.[47]

Breaking Down of the Black Town–White Town Barriers and the Rise of the Bengali South Town

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the racial barriers between the Black Town and the White Town had broken down to a large extent. Rich Bengali businessmen and bureaucrats were already buying plots and building houses in parts of the White Town, like Theatre Road and its neighbourhood. This opening up of the White Town, as mentioned earlier, corresponded with the Gladstonian phase of liberal politics in Great Britain and the emergence of a new class of **(p. 62)** assertive nationalist Bengali professionals in the Calcutta Municipality. Besides, from this period, a considerable section of the English-educated Bengali middle-class professionals and bureaucrats (medical practitioners, advocates,

teachers, civil servants, among others) began to move from their ancestral habitat in north Calcutta to the southern-most part of the town (that was still semi-rural), which they were to develop in the course of the next decades into a distinct Bengali bhadralok enclave.

These Bengali bhadraloks who built houses in south Calcutta carved out a separate space for themselves to be able to follow a more cosmopolitan lifestyle. Their cultural tastes and social norms of behaviour (which came to be known as ‘south Calcuttan’) reflected a propensity towards contemporary Western intellectual ideas, and yet a strong desire to retain and reconstruct their Bengali cultural identity. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that among the earlier Bengali upper-class settlers in south Calcutta in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries period were the descendants of the Tagore family of Jorasanko of north Calcutta. In 1898, Rabindranath’s elder brother Satyendranath Tagore (a civil servant, known for his liberal lifestyle) bought a vast property here, in an area known as Store Road then (situated behind today’s Gariahat Road), from a Muslim family. He moved from his ancestral house in Jorasanko in the Black Town to his new house here, which was partly two-storeyed and partly three-storeyed, with a tank to the north and another on the eastern side.[48]

The other important Bengali zamindari family that settled down at around the same time in these parts of south Calcutta were the Chaudhuries, who hailed from north Bengal. The most famous from this family was the barrister-turned-littérateur Pramatha Chaudhury, who set a new style of writing in colloquial Bengali through his magazine *Sobuj Patra*. He married Indira, Satyendranath Tagore’s daughter and Rabindranath’s niece. The marital relationship could have further strengthened their desire to live in close proximity in the south Calcutta neighbourhood. The Chaudhuries bought property and built houses in **(p.63)** the area stretching from today’s Gariahat Road to the borders of Park Street. While Pramatha Chaudhury lived in Bright Street, his elder brother, Ashutosh Chaudhury, owned a house in the neighbouring road called Sunny Park.

This trend of gravitating towards the south among these Bengali families invariably created a demand for further urbanization of their locale. In 1929, these articulate Bengali middle-class residents succeeded in persuading the Calcutta Improvement Trust (which was set up under the Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911) to consider a plan for Ballygunge and the Dhakuria Lake area, for ‘the purpose of providing building sites, creating new and improving existing means of communication and facilities for traffic, and affording better facilities for conservancy (for which) it was expedient to lay out new streets and alter existing streets in the area’.[49] Their intervention in the town planning of south Calcutta over the next decades led to the development of this part of the city in a

different direction, which came to be identified with a distinct Bengali culture based on cosmopolitanism.

This, however, created a fresh cultural chasm within the Bengali inhabitants of the city. The new generation of civil servants, barristers, lawyers, medical practitioners, and teachers in schools, colleges, and universities, among others, who settled down in south Calcutta, had acquired social habits and cultural tastes that were different from their ancestors who continued to follow their traditional lifestyle in the northern part of the town, or in their zamindaries in the villages. The inhabitants of south Calcutta sought freedom from the domestic constraints of the lifestyle of their north Calcutta counterparts, which they found suffocating. They were financially well-equipped—thanks to the income from their professions—to buy or occupy plots in the hitherto uninhabited stretches in the southern part of the city. Explaining the gravitation of these people towards the south, a European citizen addressing a meeting in the Calcutta Rotary Club in the 1920s observed, **(p.64)**

> Twelve hundred human beings lived every night in dozens of houses in North Calcutta which were not as big as the room in which the Rotarians were gathered.... South Calcutta was being built on because [these] people, living in intolerable conditions, were beginning to demand the rights of ordinary men to live in a place where at least they could breathe.[50]

How did these new Bengali residents ‘breathe’ in these parts of south Calcutta, which they constructed to suit their needs? What sort of houses did they build on the roads here? How did they spend their time?

The New Bengali Town in South Calcutta

From various types of contemporary reports, we come across interesting nuggets about the lifestyle of these new Bengali residents of south Calcutta. They are a far cry from those accounts left some hundred years ago by Englishmen about the houses and habits of the decadent rich Bengali families and the ‘babus’ in the Black Town in the north.

In Satyendranath Tagore’s house for instance, members of his family used to come from Jorasanko to enjoy occasional boat rides in the tanks that adjoined the house, and lose themselves in gay abandon to celebrate the festival of colours, Holi, as recounted by Rabindranath’s daughter Meera Debi in her autobiography, *Smritikatha*.[51]

Or consider again the following description of the house of the Pramatha Choudhury in Bright Street around 1917—seen through the eyes of a young Bengali middle-class émigré from a village, on his first visit to Calcutta:

> I reached ‘Kamalalya’ [the name of the house] at No.1 Bright Street, and was reassured on finding the number of the house and Mr. Choudhury’s nameplate on one side of the gate.… I stepped into the red stone chip laid path, which overlooked a well-trimmed silken green lawn on the right.… Soon a young Bengali servant came up to me. His dress was spotlessly white, cleaner than mine. He was attired in a jacket, collared **(p.65)** up to the neck and hanging down to his knees.… [He took me up to] a landing with a covering through which we reached a marble staircase that led us to a small room.

The narrator then moves to the interiors, where ‘the kitchen and the servants’ quarters are situated behind the main building, adjoining the garden’.[52]

We get a glimpse of the parties thrown by these new residents of south Calcutta at their houses from a Bengali novel of that period. It cites an invitation card: ‘Mrs. K.K. Dutta. At Home. Requests the pleasure of Mr and Mrs ...’s company on Saturday, the 15th May, 1922 at 5-30 p.m. “The Cot,” 19 Hungerford Street, Calcutta. RSVP.’ It then describes the venue of such parties, which is situated in the

> tennis court in the lawn behind the house, where small cane tables have been arranged covered with white sheets, and laid down with a spread of cakes, sandwiches, dal-puris, round kebabs, sandesh and other Indian and Western food items. Each table has a medium-sized tea pot covered with a teacosy, and is surrounded by three chairs. A few yards away, waiters are standing ready to serve the guests.[53]

Over the next few decades, the residential territory of south Calcutta expanded further south, beyond the area occupied by the Tagores, Choudhuries, and their types. The setting up of a railway station in Ballygunge (at the south-eastern end, which connected with Sealdah station in the centre of the town), as well as the laying down of a tramway track that went up to the commercial and administrative hub of Dalhousie Square, attracted a lot of Bengali middle-class families, who bought land and built houses here. Unable to afford private cars (unlike their rich fellow Bengalis further up in Gariahat Road, Bright Street, and such neighbourhoods), they could find easy access to public transport like trains and trams from Ballygunge in order to commute daily to their workplaces. This is how Rashbehari Avenue developed. Soon, the Bengali settlers who built houses in the neighbourhood began to rent **(p.66)** out portions of their residence to members of their own class—school and college teachers, clerks in government and commercial establishments, and small traders and businessmen, among similar professional and occupational groups. Thus, the composition of the Bengali population of this part of south Calcutta made it a

more middle-class area, unlike the rather exclusive preserve of the rich Bengali barristers and bureaucrats that one found in the other part.

The 1940s and the Postcolonial Phase of Urbanization

The outbreak of World War II marked the beginning of a change in the socio-cultural landscape of Calcutta. The War period was accompanied and followed by a series of traumatic historical events that left their scars on the topography of Calcutta. It saw thousands of victims of the 1943 famine dying on its roads and pavements. A few years later, the same roads became the site of popular demonstrations against British colonial rule (1945–6), which were drowned in blood by the guns of its police. The site was soon to be taken over by the hired goons of unscrupulous politicians, who, in the name of protecting their respective religious communities, enacted the Great Calcutta Killing of innocent Hindus and Muslims in 1946.

Having gone through the ordeal during this period, Calcutta's roads heaved a sigh of relief when they woke up to the new era of Independence on 15 August 1947. But it was a brief spell of reprieve. The partition of the subcontinent that accompanied Independence also saw the arrival of thousands of Hindu families from East Pakistan, who, fearing persecution there, escaped to West Bengal. While the agricultural class among them crossed over to the rural areas (in the villages that were across the newly demarcated border) to resume their occupations, the educated middle-class professionals from among these East Bengali migrants initially moved over to Calcutta—the ever sought-after destination for livelihood in a metropolis. But for various **(p.67)** reasons—paucity of space, prejudices of the original inhabitants (who denigrated these migrants by the pejorative term 'Bangal')—these middle-class East Bengali migrants were compelled to shift to the peripheries of the city (Jadavpur, Garia in the south-east, and Dum Dum and Baranagore in the north-east). Here they cleared the land and built houses, then they set up a socio-cultural infrastructure of schools, medical shops, clubs, and other institutions manned by members of their own community who were educated and skilled in these professions. This new generation of migrants fuelled to a large extent the next phase of urbanization in Calcutta. Under their pressure, the municipality built new roads and expanded and improved the existing paths to connect them with the main city. It was in this way that the southern borders of Calcutta were further extended to the outlying areas.

As for the other parts of the city, the Black Town remained stagnant, with hardly any improvement in its roads and streets, looking as crowded and dingy as during the colonial period. The White Town, in contrast, continued with its prosperous lifestyle. The carrying over of the colonial style of governance in the post-Independence era ensured the assiduous preservation and protection of the old road system in Dalhousie Square and its neighbourhood, which remained the centre of administration. In the residential part of White Town, houses once

occupied by Europeans were bought by rich Indians (mainly businessmen). But the shops and commercial establishments on these roads, even after a change in ownership following Independence, pursued the style of the colonial days, displaying goods imported from the West and offering services to the English-educated Indian elite. Whiteway Laidlaw in Esplanade and Hall and Anderson in Park Street continued to be typical representatives of this style till the 1960s.

Over the course of the next decades, however, the character of the roads in the erstwhile White Town changed. The Indian residents, while maintaining the old fashionable lifestyle that marked the area, **(p.68)** supplemented it with indigenous customs and habits. Thus, on occasions like religious festivals, the pavements are today often encroached upon by them to set up canopies for idols, or organize some religious discourse. The dining halls of old European clubs, which they have taken over, are rented out for wedding ceremonies.

A Parenthesis: A Flaneur's Diary of a Cardboard City

But within the boundaries of these three towns, there has survived another Calcutta—the city of the pavement dwellers. During its various phases of urbanization, Calcutta's pavements had undergone changes. The first pavement —called footpath in those days—as mentioned earlier, was laid down in 1858 in the Chowringhee–Theatre Road area, by filling up the open drain that used to run along the length of Chowringhee Road on its eastern side neighbouring Theatre Road. The higher-level footpath was constructed by covering the drain with a brick arch, and a pathway made over it, at a total cost of about 12,000 rupees. It was needed to protect the gas pillars that were coming up at that time, placed just within reach of the kerb stone of the road.[54]

The British municipality administrators initially thought that the local Bengali inhabitants, being strangers to this newly introduced footpath, 'would never use it when completed'. But they soon found out that the 'natives … use it (as) any other arrangement which tended to their comfort and safety without entailing expense'.[55]

The 'natives' of today's Theatre Road continue to use the footpath to 'tend to their comfort and safety'—but in a different way. Sections of them have taken over the footpath and are using it in an indigenous way as pavement hawkers, food-stall owners, and are engaged in a variety of occupations that cater to the need of pedestrians. At night, it is this footpath which becomes the makeshift bedroom of daily wage labourers who have no homes. It is on these pavements that they make love and give birth to a new generation, fight among themselves and curse each **(p.69)** other, and plan their next move, standing on the edge of the perpetual uncertainty that drive them to and fro. Thus, the footpath, which was basically constructed to protect the gas light pillars (necessary to illuminate the town), and was justified as a measure for the safety of foot passengers in Calcutta, has been turned to a different use altogether.

The present writer—in the course of investigations associated with his research project—quite often had to operate as a Baudeleaurian flaneur, walking down the streets and pavements of Calcutta. Let me quote a few lines from the diary that I maintained during that period (2010–11):

> At midnight, as I walk down the paths of neon-lit glittering Park Street–Theatre Road, where the bars and restaurants are still alive, I follow my nose through the old familiar territory and soon sniff my way into one of the back lanes. The grocery stores and tea shops that operate here during the day have already put up their shutters. Dim street lights spread a lemon haze. I enter the cardboard city—another urban complex made up of paper and plastic, scraps and rags.
>
> It is now time for another Kolkata to come alive. Knots of five or six families of men and women, old and young, drag out their belongings which remained hidden during the day under archways, or inside the crevice of some dilapidated building, they lay down on the pavements their beddings—plastic sheets, discarded packing case hardboards, piles of newspapers, or even vermin-eaten rags. They light up the brick-made ovens that they knock up at a moment's notice, and put on them aluminium pots and pans cooking rice and dal. Stretches of public thoroughfare thus become private homes.
>
> As I pass along their street kitchens and bedrooms, I cannot but help eavesdropping—listening to their conversations, some in confidential whispers, some in affectionate tones of love and care, some breaking out in raucous shouts of abuse.… It is these masses of heterogeneous families who remain outside the boom of IT centres and shopping malls. They belong to the informal sector, serving the city's upper- and middle-class residents as part-time domestic helps, rickshaw pullers, vegetable vendors, hawkers of bits and pieces of daily need, presswallahs who iron clothes—the same old daily needs that the city's underclasses had been serving for centuries.

(p.70) Changing Patois of Calcutta Neighbourhoods

In keeping with its fractured origins, Calcutta's language had also been splintered into a variety of dialects in the past, and continues to change by acquiring new idioms and hybrid lingos in the present. Even among the Bengali-speaking citizens, the manner of pronunciation of syllables ('s' in particular) and the use of certain colloquial expressions, among other features, had set apart north Calcutta from south Calcutta.

New words were introduced in the Bengali language with the colonization of Bengal and the urbanization of Calcutta. The residents of the nineteenth-century Black Town in the north invented particular terms to illustrate aspects of contemporary society. Among many such expressions, we come across words like

kuthi-oala (derived from the original Bengali *kuthi*, meaning house), used in colonial Calcutta to refer to the employees of the merchant houses of the East India Company; *kala-gechhey tham* (to describe the cylindrical pillars of the Western-type houses that were coming up in the Black Town, which resembled *kala-gachh* or banana trees); and *firingi khompa* (a woman's hair rolled up in a knot behind the neck, in imitation of European women's hairstyle). The Bengalis of the Black Town also indigenized English words in their colloquial speech. Thus, we hear about a clock known as *mekabi-clak* (derived from the name of its manufacturer, James McCabe, a late eighteenth-century watchmaker, whose clocks were imported from London by the English and rich Bengali residents of Calcutta in those days). Official English terms like 'rounds'—used for daily and nightly police patrols across the city's roads—were turned into the Bengali *rond*. The English name of the horse carriage 'phaeton' was changed into *feting*.[56]

A similar hybridization was evident in the colloquial language of the English inhabitants of the White Town in the colonial period. They Anglicized the Bengali and Urdu terms that they had to use in their daily conversations with their local employees. Emma Roberts, a British woman who visited Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, said that **(p.71)** only four words would suffice to carry a traveller over India. These words, which allowed her to order her palanquin-bearers, were four terms: (*a*) 'otaw' ('othao' in Bengali, meaning 'lift up'); (*b*) 'jeldi jaw' (move fast); (*c*) 'pinnake pannee low' (drink when you are thirsty); and (*d*) 'dustoor ka maffic' (behave according to the usual rules). Still later, the English inhabitants of the White Town got used to calling out 'koi hai' (meaning 'anyone there?') when ordering their household menials, and incorporated in their official records words like 'pucca' to designate brick-built houses, or used in their daily conversations terms like 'babus' to describe their Bengali co-citizens.[57]

When we reach the South Town, which developed at the beginning of the twentieth century as a Bengali middle-class enclave, we find a change in the linguistic culture. The conversations of the early generation of educated professionals were marked by careful pronunciation and use of words of standard Bengali language. A large number of Brahmo Samaj families who settled down here influenced the cultural pattern of the residents. In a contemporary Bengali novel, we find how a visitor from North Calcutta reacted to the chaste and well-disciplined atmosphere in their homes: 'Everything is so spic and span around them, that one constantly feels the need to be on alert.'[58] From the post-Independence era, however, the linguistic character of South Calcutta changed. With the influx of migrants from East Pakistan following Partition (who set up colonies on the outer edges of this part of Calcutta and helped it develop into a part of the city), the East Bengali dialect and pronunciation made their presence felt in the streets and markets of South Calcutta.

Today, in the twenty-first century, Calcutta's lingo reflects a multicultural flux. The Bengali spoken in streets and homes is a new hybrid language that is born of the socio-economic urge to join the race of cosmopolitanism in the era of globalized urbanization. We thus hear, even in the conservative citadel of old Bengali in north Calcutta, members of the younger generation speaking a Bengali mixed with Hindi **(p.72)** expressions (borrowed from Bollywood films). In the southern parts of the city, their better-off counterparts mostly speak English, and even when talking in Bengali, they intersperse it with English idioms that are current in the multinational corporate sector. Parents prefer to send their children to English-medium schools to train them up to enable them to enter this sector. There is a growing trend of distancing from speaking, reading, and writing in Bengali among this class of upwardly mobile young people.

Roads: From Surface to Underground and to the Skies

Meanwhile, the roads connecting the Black, White, and South towns have been squeezed by lack of adequate space to bear the increasing pressure of traffic and population. All through the last centuries, they had carried a wide variety of vehicles, ranging from bullock carts in the eighteenth, palanquins and horse-driven carriages in the nineteenth, to the modern public transport system of trams, buses, and private motor cars in the twentieth centuries. By the latter half of the twentieth century, however, Calcutta's highways had begun to collapse. Poor maintenance of the surface and an outmoded drainage system that flowed under them, created potholes and puddles, and flooded the roads with knee-deep water during the rains. It resulted in unending traffic jams that disrupted the economy and social life of the city. The old arterial roads connecting the north with the south (Chitpur Road, Cornwallis Street, Chowringhee Road, Chittaranjan Avenue, and Circular Road) have reached a saturation point. Only 6.2 per cent of the area of Calcutta consists of roads, as compared to 20 per cent and above in other metro cities. Yet, they bear a vehicle population of around 1.6 million, and there is little scope of increasing the road area.

In order to cope with the problem, the civic and traffic authorities have sought refuge underneath the roads. The Calcutta Metropolitan Transport Project was initiated in 1969. Over the next two decades, **(p.73)** with the help of the Indian railways, an underground one-track rail line was laid down connecting the south and the north, which ran through the main administrative and commercial zones at the centre. It started commercial operations in 1984, and today it carries about 5,00,000 passengers a day. Thus, Calcutta became the first of all the Indian metropolises to adopt a modern metro railway system—followed by New Delhi, the capital, some years later.

This parallel subterranean railway route, peculiarly enough, followed the same course that ran above it—the arterial highway—used for centuries by pilgrims and traders, which began from the Bagbazar–Chitpur crossing in the north to Kalighat in the south (where the pilgrims came to pay their obeisance to the goddess Kali). It was this highway that had been later reconstructed and utilized by the colonial town planners who sliced off roads from it to create their own respective zones of administrative, commercial, and residential interests (as described earlier in this chapter). Today's Calcutta Metro spans this same north–south stretch.

But instead of choosing the opening from the north-western part of the Bagbazar–Chitpur crossing, the Metro authorities selected a route from the north-eastern edge of Bagbazar in its crossing with Shyambazar at the northern tip of the city. They then decided to extend it to Tollygunge and beyond on the south-eastern brink, to Garia. It stops at stations in this underground terrain which commemorate spots situated above ground that are associated with past history or personalities (for example, Sutanuti, Jatin Das, Kazi Nazrul).

The new plans for traffic have not only delved down into the underbelly of Calcutta, but also looked upwards towards the sky. Along with laying down railway tracks underneath its outer crust, the authorities have also raised the existing roads aloft from the surface by creating a number of flyovers to carry fast moving traffic. The road system in Calcutta thus now follows a three-tier vertical trajectory—from the ultra-modern underground metro at the bottom, through the old roads across its surface, to the new-fangled flyovers that soar above the city. **(p.74)** These flyovers are keeping pace with the growth of the other ascendant architecture—the skyscrapers that house the upwardly mobile population of the city.

From Metropolis to Megalopolis in the Era of Neo-Liberal Globalization

When we reach the twenty-first century, we find that Calcutta has exhausted its capacity of vertical expansion because of the infrastructural limits to high-rise construction, among other constraints. The present administrators, therefore, have to seek space elsewhere for a horizontal urban expansion. This search is driven by the desire for the transformation of the old metropolis into a modern megalopolis. A megalopolis is a conglomeration of large urban centres with enough continuity and internal interconnection for each of them to be considered a system itself, and yet a part of the megalopolitan configuration.[59] The desire to expand the metropolis of Calcutta into a megalopolis is fuelled by the new nexus of corporate houses, builders, contractors, and politicians that had come up in the 1990s with the opening up of the Indian economy to the neo-liberal model of economic growth. In the new plan of expansion, lands are being acquired on the outskirts of the city to set up high-tech townships and enclaves that will feed the demands of the globalized neo-liberal economic system and represent its culture. They will be an extension of the metropolis of Calcutta,

and yet different from it in their living style. They will thus conform to the concept of a megalopolis that allows coexistence between and territorial separation from residents of the old metropolis (Calcutta in this case), and those inhabiting the newly emerging spaces of high-tech urbanization on its outskirts.

In this new phase of upgrading Calcutta into a megalopolis, the Indian ruling class is resorting to the old colonial methods of acquiring land. Like the East India Company of the past, which took over **(p.75)** three villages to create the city of Calcutta, the modern town planners are looking towards the east—taking over large swathes of rural habitations in Rajarhat on the north-eastern outskirts of Calcutta. Here the planners are fashioning a walled city. Massive concrete barriers protect multistoreyed housing complexes inhabited by the upper strata of society. Shopping malls and entertainment parks meant for the exclusive use of this strata are equally shielded by security guards and a surveillance system that can detect intruders who come from outside this privileged circle. Flyways that hang above these residential and shopping complexes constitute the new road network that is again meant exclusively for high-speed vehicular traffic, and is barred from use by pedestrians. The elitist character of the township that is being designed by the present Indian planners is an echo from the colonial past—the exclusivist nature of the White Town, which was carved out by the British rulers in nineteenth-century Calcutta.[60]

Urbanization in modern Calcutta is thus marked by a three-pronged process of (*a*) continuation of the colonial model (through appropriation of land and displacement of its inhabitants), (*b*) adoption of the neo-liberal model (of creating enclaves for the dominant rich), and (*c*) globalization of upper-class cultural behavioural norms. The process aggravates socio-economic ills, and is acquiring new discriminatory features that institutionalize those ills under a globalized neo-liberal regime.

Notes:

(1.) Quoted in James Ranald Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Calcutta Military Orphan Press, 1837).

(2.) Quoted in Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta*.

(3.) Joseph Mullens, *London and Calcutta: Compared in Their Heathenism, Their Privileges and Their Prospects* (London: 1869).

(4.) Nirmal K. Bose, *Calcutta 1964: A Social Survey* (Bombay: Lalvani House, 1968).

(5.) Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta*.

(6.) Quoted in B.V. Roy, *Old Calcutta Cameos* (Calcutta: Asoka Library, 1946).

(7.) Quoted from S.W. Goode, *Municipal Calcutta, Its Institutions, in Their Origin and Growth* (Edinburgh: T&A Constable, 1916).

(8.) Ajit Kumar Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath: Samajey O Sanskrititey* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd, 2008).

(9.) Mullens, *London and Calcutta*.

(10.) Mullens, *London and Calcutta*.

(11.) *Report on Health in Calcutta*, 1887, presented to the Chairman of the Corporation by W.J. Simpson, MD, Health Officer (Calcutta Corporation, 1890, available at the National Library, Kolkata).

(12.) Report of Kailas Chunder Bose, LMS, quoted in *Report on Health in Calcutta*.

(13.) Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta*.

(14.) *Report from the Municipal Commissioners for the Town of Calcutta to the Hon'ble J.P. Grant, Lt. Governor of Bengal,* 1 March 1861, National Library, Kolkata.

(15.) *Samachar Darpan*, 31 March 1821.

(16.) *Calcutta Municipal Corporation Administration Report 1881/Town Council Proceedings 1880*, quoted in Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*.

(17.) M.W. Swanson, as quoted in Anthony D. King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World Economy* (London: Routledge, 1990).

(18.) King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World Economy*.

(19.) The term 'strategic beautification' was used by Walter Benjamin with reference to the slum clearance plan of Baron Haussmann, a minister of Napoleon III in the late 1840s, who by breaking up working-class slums in Paris, simply pushed out these ugly symptoms of urbanization and health hazards of poverty from central Paris into the suburbs. (Re: *The Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999].) Like the public parks and pleasure grounds that were created by Haussmann on the site of old slums in nineteenth-century Paris, in Calcutta too several major gardens with tanks were built along arterial roads—Cornwallis Square and

College Square in the north, and Wellington Square and Wellesley Square in the centre.

(20.) Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*.

(21.) *Departmental Report by the Deputy Chairman of Bustee Department, in the Report of the Municipal Administration of Calcutta: 1908–09*, National Library, Kolkata.

(22.) *Legal Opinions and Rulings: April 1909–March 1913* (Corporation of Calcutta, 1913).

(23.) R.J. Minney, *Night Life of Calcutta* (Calcutta: The Muston Company, 6 Hastings Street, 1919). A different picture of how the 'babus' were treated by the prostitutes is available from a late nineteenth-century Bengali writer's vivid description of a street scene in Chitpore, where the clerks returning home in the evening had to suffer ridicules poured upon them by prostitutes from the balconies of their houses:

> We are whores. Although we sell our bodies, we can adopt hundreds of clerks like you. Here you are, coming back from your offices after pen-pushing throughout the day—and how much have you earned? We stay home and earn eight or ten rupees every hour. We have earned in one generation the amount of wealth which you can never think of accumulating from your jobs over three generations.... Will you be our servants? We can pay you the salary which you get from your offices. (Durgacharan Ray, *Debganer Martye Agomon* [Calcutta: Dey's Publication, 1984 (1889)].)

(24.) A.K. Roy, *A Short History of Calcutta, Town and Suburbs: Census of India, 1901*, vol. 7, part I, reprint (Calcutta: Rddhi-India, 1982), p. 50.

(25.) Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978), p. 5.

(26.) A.K. Roy, *A Short History of Calcutta*.

(27.) Bolts' *Considerations, 1772*, referred to by A.K. Roy, *A Short History of Calcutta*, p. 51.

(28.) Quoted in P.T. Nair, ed., *British Social Life in Ancient Calcutta* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1983).

(29.) Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta*.

(30.) Mullens, *London and Calcutta*.

(31.) Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakraborty, 'Maidan: The Open Space in History', *Social Scientist* 38, nos 1–2 (January–February 2010): 3–22. This excellent article narrates, through a rigorous examination of contemporary records, the development of the Maidan as an important instrument in the colonial town planning of Calcutta.

(32.) H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of the Town of Calcutta Taken on the 6th April 1876* (C.S. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1876).

(33.) For an interesting and visual description of the controversy over the establishment of the Hogg Market, see *BASANTAK*, a Bengali cartoon magazine published during that time, reprinted recently in *BASANTAK* (vols 1 and 2), collected and annotated by Chandi Lahiri (Kolkata: New Age Publishers, n.d.).

(34.) Robert L. Hardgrave Jr, *A Portrait of the Hindus: Balthazar Solvyns and the European Image of India. 1760–1824'* (New York: Oxford University Press and Mapin Publishers, 2004).

(35.) Phebe Gibbs, *Hartly House* (1789), available https://books.google.co.in/books?id=hEFWAAAAcAAJ&pg=PA13&dq=Swiftly+did+we+pass+along,+for+it+seems+the+palanquin+bearers+(with+proper+relays+…)+are+so+expert&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi9jPzr6e_NAhUmL8AKHZhEA-wQ6AEIHDAA#v=onepage&q=Swiftly%20did%20we%20pass%20along%2C%20for%20it%20se last accessed on 13 July 2016.

(36.) Quoted in B.V. Roy, *Old Calcutta Cameos*.

(37.) *Report from the Municipal Commissioners for the Town of Calcutta to the Hon'ble J.P. Grant*.

(38.) *Administration Report of the Calcutta Municipality for 1873* (Calcutta: Printing Offices of the Justices, 1874).

(39.) An advertisement in the early twentieth century gives us a list of imported automobiles, which included names like British Wolsely, Arrol-Johnston, Demster, French Vinot cars, and American Buick cars. (Advertisement in *Thackers' Calcutta Directory,* 1918, inserted by Dykes & Co. Ltd.)

(40.) *The Proceedings of the Meeting of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, 8.12.15,* quoted in Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*. Basu's book gives an excellently documented account of the history of road-building in colonial Calcutta under the municipality and the debates over the various technologies. For an extremely lucid and critical analysis of the colonial policy of road-building in the city, see Chapter 4 of Partho Datta's *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta c. 1800–c. 1940* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012).

(41.) *Sambad Prabhakar*, 22.4.1265 (Bengali calendar, corresponding to the year 1858).

(42.) *Administrative Report of the Calcutta Municipality for 1873* (Calcutta: Printing Office of the Justices, 1874).

(43.) *Sulabh Samachar,* 25 Ashar 1280 (Bengali calendar, corresponding to the year 1873). The letter illustrates how the extension of the sewer system to the Black Town (described in Chapter 1) did little to improve the plight of pedestrians.

(44.) Report of W.J. Simpson, health officer to the chairman of the Corporation, in *Report on Health in Calcutta*, 1887. Gas leakage from underground pipes often led to the suffocation of labourers working inside sewer manholes. In 1907, in an effort to save one such labourer, a citizen called Nafar Kundu died. His name adorns a street in Calcutta.

(45.) *Samachar Darpan*, 2 June 1827.

(46.) *Sambad Prabhakar*, 17 February 1851.

(47.) An account of the protests against the Hackney Carriage Act can be found in the present author's *The Wicked City: Crime and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011).

(48.) Soumitra Das in *Telegraph*, 21 June 2009 (Calcutta). Satyendranath's son, Surendranath Tagore, sold off the house to the industrialist G.D. Birla in 1919. Reconstructed and redesigned in 1922, it today houses the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, its new address being 19A Gurusaday Dutta Road, following the renaming of the old Store Road.

(49.) *Proceedings of the Meeting of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, held on Saturday, the 16th February, 1929*, as reported in *Calcutta Municipal Gazette,* 6 April 1929.

(50.) *Calcutta Municipal Gazette,* 6 April 1929.

(51.) Das, *Telegraph*.

(52.) Pabitra Gangopadhyay, *Chaloman Jeeban* (Calcutta: 1952), pp. 97–8.

(53.) Gokul Nag, *Pathik* (Calcutta: Kallol Publishing House, 1925).

(54.) *Report of the Municipal Commissioners of Calcutta on the Progress of the Works Connected with the Drainage and Sewerage of the Town* (Calcutta: 1861).

(55.) *Report of the Municipal Commissioners of Calcutta on the Progress of the Works Connected with the Drainage and Sewerage of the Town*.

(56.) The examples have been taken from Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom Penchar Naksha,* published in 1862. An early nineteenth-century writer of Calcutta, Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay (1787–1848), in his *Kolikata Kamalalya* (1823), gives us a list of the new words and expressions that were introduced in the conversations of Bengali residents of the Black Town in those days.

(57.) Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1837). Further hybridization of the English language occurred in the course of its use by the Anglo-Indian residents (born of mixed Eurasian parentage), who inhabited the long stretch from old Bowbazar in the centre to today's Lower Circular Road in the east.

(58.) Nag, *Pathik*.

(59.) The term 'megalopolis' was introduced in the discourse of urban history in 1961 by the French geographer–historian Jean Gottman, who in his book, *Megalopolis: The Urban Seaboard of the United States*, described the concentration of interconnected urban centres, with populations ranging from 10 to 20 million over scores of miles along north-east America. Later, the term came to be applied in the global context for 'any many-centred, multi-city, urban area … generally dominated by low-density settlement and complex network of economic specialization' (Oxford Dictionary of Geography). It is thus an urban configuration marked by high-quality communication and transportation facilities, and an international urban system based on flows of goods and services, investments, and inter-migration of human resources (like skilled professionals and manual labourers).

(60.) See Chapter 6 of this book for a brief examination of the planning of New Town in Rajarhat and its implications for the citizens, and also the excellent critical study *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination* by Ishita Dey, Ranabir Samaddar, and Suhit Sen, published by the Calcutta Research Group, 2013.

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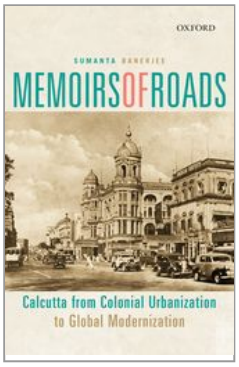

Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Modernization
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Bagbazar Street

The Grandmother

Sumanta Banerjee

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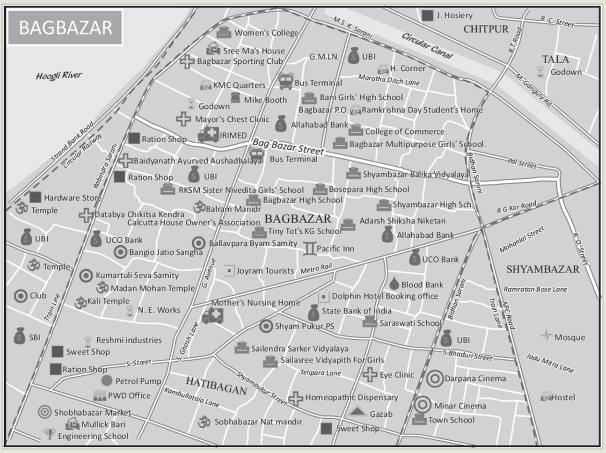
Abstract and Keywords

Bagbazar Street was one of the earliest roads that was developed in precolonial Bengal. It served as a bullock-cart path for traders to convey goods to the quay (known as Bagbazar ghat) on the banks of the Hooghly River that flowed by, to be transported by boats to markets. In the mid-eighteenth century, the merchant–colonialist nexus of the East India Company developed this path into a full-fledged concrete road so that its soldiers could carry canons to the eastern borders that were being threatened then by the army of Bengal's nawab, Siraj-ud-dowlah, who opposed the Company's colonizing plans. Over the next two centuries, Bagbazar developed into a hub of anti-colonial nationalist agitations for its Bengali residents, as well as becoming a centre of cultural activities.

Keywords: Bagbazar ghat, Siraj-ud-dowlah, East India Company, Hoogly River, concrete road, anti-colonial, nationalist

Bagbazar Street, which runs through the uppermost tip of north Calcutta, can trace its antecedents to the precolonial era. From a bullock-cart path some three hundred years ago, it evolved into a metropolitan thoroughfare in the nineteenth century. Today it continues to house the descendants of its old families, and transports them to the heart of the city through the latest technology of the metro railway that runs under its belly (see Map 3.1).

In the course of its long history, various factors shaped the growth of Bagbazar Street: (*a*) world trade in the seventeenth century; (*b*) British colonial commercial and military requirements in the eighteenth century; (*c*) the Indian nationalist movement and Hindu religious revivalism in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries; and (*d*) over all these years, the changing technology of road-building.



Map 3.1 Bagbazar, 2016

Source: Courtesy of the author.

The road originated as a narrow strip that cut horizontally across the village Sutanuti in precolonial Bengal. The village, situated on the banks of the Hooghly River on the east, was well known for the fine quality of cotton yarn and chintz that were spun there by traditional artisans. In fact, the name Sutanuti is derived from the word ‘suta’ or thread and ‘nuti’ or skein. It was the commercial prospects of this profession that prompted Bengali traders and manufacturers—the Seths **(p.82)** and Basaks—to carve out a road cutting through the village. They collected the cotton yarn from the artisans, manufactured textiles, and gathered every week at a bazaar (market) at the end of the road on the banks of the river to sell their goods. Thus, around this market emerged Bagbazar. Since it was situated at a site where the river took a turn (called ‘baank’ in Bengali and Hindi also), it came to be known as ‘Baank-bazar’, and later, Bagbazar. Around the seventeenth century, the bazaar, held twice a week then—Thursdays and Sundays—attracted a lot of European traders who arrived by boats to buy the textiles.[1]

The road acquired a new importance with the consolidation of the East India Company’s rule over Bengal. As explained in Chapter 1, the village Sutanuti was taken over by the Company in 1698 under an agreement with the Mughal governor of Bengal that allowed them to **(p.83)** be zamindars or revenue-collecting owners of three villages—Sutanuti, Dihi Kolikata, and Gobindapur—which were later to be turned into the city of Calcutta. From then onwards, the jungles around the road—today’s Bagbazar Street—began to be cleared to make way for trading centres for European and Indian merchants, administrative quarters for the Company’s British officials, and entertainment parks for these people. Within five years, by 1703, at least 105 houses had come up on either side of the road.

The most impressive building was the garden house of Captain Charles Perrin, on the banks of the Hooghly, which became the weekend rendezvous of the European settlers in Calcutta. According to some historians, the name Bagbazar derives from the ‘bag’ or garden of Perrin, near which the market thrived.

Be that as it may, Charles Perrin deserves a separate footnote in the history of Bagbazar Street. He was a typical representative of the British adventurers who came to India in those days in search of fortune. He arrived in India at the end of the seventeenth century as a master commandeering a ship. He borrowed some money from the then British Collector of Calcutta, Ralph Sheldon, and then set sail for Persia (today’s Iran) from where he brought back jars of vintage wine, and on the way back, sacks of chillies from Goa for sale in Calcutta. But he fell foul of Sheldon, and unable to pay off the debts that he owed to many other European citizens of Calcutta, he finally sold off the garden house to the East India Company.[2]

In 1731, the East India Company decided to further develop the street, as obvious from a directive: ‘There being a proper place for a Buzar near Perrins Garden, and as we are informed will bring in a good revenue to the Honourable Company, if a road and Ditches were made to it, agreed that the Jemindar do make them.’[3] The street was really turned into a regular road as evident from a map of Calcutta in 1757, which shows it as a well-demarcated road lined with trees. Still later, a 1784 plan of Calcutta describes the road as about a quarter of a mile **(p.84)** long, and in A. Upjohn’s map of 2 April 1794, the road was named Old Powder Mill Road, and subsequently Old Powder Mill Bazar Road. In all probability, therefore, it was named Bagbazar Street only after 1794, perhaps at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[4]

Meanwhile, the commercial success of the road and the fashionable ambience of its environs were to be rudely disrupted by new developments. In 1753, Colonel C.F. Scott, Commandant of the garrison and Engineer General in the service of the East India Company (who had bought Perrin’s Garden), erected gunpowder mills on the site of Perrin’s massive garden house, as a part of military fortifications around the village of Sutanuti. It was because of this that the street came to be known as Old Powder Mill Bazar and Road. (Even as late as the 1920s, the older residents living in Bagbazar Street used to call it Barud-khana, meaning gunpowder store.) These acts of the East India Company were in violation of the 1698 agreement that restricted the Company’s role only to that of a revenue collector. In retaliation against the Company’s illegal acts, the then Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-dowlah attacked Bagbazar and the fortifications protecting the site of Perrin’s erstwhile garden house on 16 June 1756. But his soldiers were driven away by the Company’s better-equipped armed forces. During this offensive, this road in Bagbazar became an important conduit for the British to transport their arms and soldiers.[5]

Even though the Company's soldiers managed to resist Siraj's army, the British settlers started moving away from Bagbazar in apprehension of future attacks (in fact, Siraj did attack Calcutta and occupy the town for a brief while in 1756). The East India Company also appeared to regard Bagbazar as a rather unsafe spot that could be insecure for future investments. In 1777, it transferred its *talukdari* (ownership) rights over the Sutanuti village, along with the markets in Bagbazar, to Maharaja Nabakrishna Deb of the Shobhabazar royal family of north Calcutta—a protégé of the Company.[6] But it retained control over the commercial transactions that were conducted on the road there. Since **(p.85)** the main market called Bagbazar attracted vendors and customers from among the local Bengali inhabitants, the Company held on to its ownership and reaped profits from it. In order to stave off rivals, it laid down a number of by-laws in the 1780s, banning the setting up of unauthorized bazaars, removing straw huts (which housed unauthorized vendors), and prohibiting encroachments on the public road by vendors.

Needless to say, the rules of the road in this part of Calcutta always prevailed over the rules laid down by the colonial administration. From contemporary official records, we find how the colonial authorities felt frustrated with the failure of every effort of theirs. When the straw huts were removed from one place for instance, they were re-established by their inhabitants in another place. Even when encroachments on public roads like Bagbazar Street were banned, illegal vending became rampant on these roads, and was carried out with the connivance of public servants (called *gomastah*s) who were in charge of markets like Bagbazar. They encouraged people to erect stands and vend their goods on the high road opposite the main bazaar, and as commission for the concession that they had granted these vendors, they collected 'cowries' (coins made from shells which were still in use as currency in commercial transactions in the late eighteenth century).[7]

The Nouveau Riche of Bagbazar Street

Meanwhile, a new generation of Bengalis had begun to settle down in the Bagbazar area from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Unlike the old mercantile community of Seths and Basaks, who had earlier carved out the road, these settlers were *banian*s (brokers to the British traders) and *dewan*s (intermediaries in the judicial and revenue administration of the East India Company) who had made fortunes through profitable transactions with the Company. They were joined in the 1760–70 period by another class of Bengalis—the landholders who were ousted from **(p.86)** Gobindapur village in the south to make way for the building of the new Fort William there, and were given cash compensation to buy land and settle down in the Sutanuti area of the north.[8]

These various groups of Bengali settlers in Bagbazar bought land, built houses for themselves, and set up bazaars and bustees that they rented out to lower-class traders and shopkeepers, manual labourers, and street vendors, whom

they needed for their daily requirements. It was this class of nouveau riche Bengalis who succeeded Captain Perrin and his white compatriots in taking over Bagbazar Street. All through the eighteenth century, it saw a flurry of construction activities. Although the road and its surroundings retained their old character of a bazaar (catering to the needs of the local population), huge mansions and temples cropped up on either side of the road built by these rich Bengalis who lived lavishly.

A typical representative of this class was Gobindaram Mitra, who was the dewan to the East India Company's English collector of Calcutta. He amassed a fortune by extorting money from Bengali farmers and citizens on the plea of collecting revenue, part of which he kept for himself and the rest of which he gave to his patrons in the Company. He was naturally admired by the Company for his loyalty, and was given the title of 'black zamindar'. But he was hated by his fellow Bengali citizens, who denounced him in a contemporary street doggerel that identified him with his 'chhodi' or the cane which he wielded over the poor.[9] Probably in a bid to make amends for his misdeeds, in 1725, Gobindaram Mitra built a huge temple on Chitpur Road bordering Bagbazar, facing the Hooghly River. It was known as the Navaratna Mandir among Bengalis, and the 'Black Pagoda' among the English (because of Mitra's fame as the 'black zamindar' within the community of his English admirers). It stood higher than the 165 feet tall Ochterlony Monument (named after a British general, and now renamed Shahid Minar) that stands in the heart of the Maidan (the vast green space) in Calcutta. A devastating cyclone and earthquake in 1737 destroyed the **(p.87)** cupolas of Gobindaram Mitra's temple. But it was rebuilt later and still stands today on the banks of the Hooghly.

Another typical example of the contemporary aristocrats who resided around Bagbazar Street in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries was Shibchandra Mukhopadhyay. He represented the trend of profligacy that marked the lifestyle of the descendants of the old Bengali grandees of the Black Town of north Calcutta. His father made money as a dewan to several English officers. Soon after his father's death, Shibchandra decided to make use of his fortune by indulging in an eccentric and expensive pastime. In his palatial ancestral house north of Bagbazar Street, he set up a hemp-smoking club! The floor of the clubhouse was carpeted with tobacco leaves and walls made from hemp leaves. Members were divided into three classes according to the amount of hemp which they could smoke. They were given names of different birds and were expected to warble accordingly. Shibchandra served them with sumptuous meals along with hemp.[10]

Although Shibchandra, along with the end of his fortune, passed away at the early age of 36 in 1816, his reputation survived till the mid-nineteenth century. His hemp club in Bagbazar appeared to have set an ideal in the hierarchy of drugs and drinks that was developing in Calcutta in those days. Subtle class

distinctions were emerging in the habits of addictions and intoxications of the citizens. While the traditional addicts in Bagbazar remained loyal to hemp and opium, a new generation of Anglicized students of Hindu College, situated further south in College Street (named after the educational institutes that were being set up there), took to whisky and sherry imported from Europe. The traditionalist hemp smokers and opium addicts of Bagbazar spun rhymes deriding the neophyte boozers of Hindu College:

> *Deber durlabh dugdha chhana, ta na holey guli rochey na,*
> *Kochu-ghechur karma noy re jadu!*
> *Shunir dokaney giye, tak tak pheley diye*
> *Dhuk korey merey diley shudhu.* **(p.88)**

(We drink milk and take cheese, which are costly even for the gods. Without that, we do not enjoy hemp. This isn't the pastime of riff-raff, dear friends! You people go to a wine shop, shell out money, and merely gulp down the drink).[11]

The leisurely and elaborate mode of smoking hemp accompanied by expensive meals, which only the idle decadent descendants of the old banians and dewans could afford, stood out in sharp contrast with the new habit of taking a few drinks fast for a quick kick, which was prevalent among the young students of middle-class families.

Emergence of New Classes in Bagbazar

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the socio-economic composition—as well as the topography—of the Bagbazar area had changed. Declining fortunes of the old comprador families led to divisions within their ranks, and reduced their descendants to the status of middle-class professionals or clerks in the colonial administrative structure, or petty shopkeepers and businessmen in the bazaar. They were joined by members of similar occupations from outside. The 1876 census gives us an interesting glimpse into the changing socio-economic profile of the residents of this part of the town. Instead of the precolonial class of merchants, and the early colonial generation of banians and dewans who dominated the city from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries, the majority of the middle- and upper-class Bengalis inhabiting the area in the nineteenth century belonged to a variety of occupational groups: (*a*) employees in government services like the police department, public works, post offices, educational institutions, and so on; (*b*) independent professionals like lawyers, attorneys, articled clerks, teachers, and medical practitioners of both traditional Ayurvedic and Western medical disciplines, among others; and (*c*) those engaged in commerce and financial transactions like owners of ships and boats, shopkeepers, bankers, and moneylenders.[12] **(p.89)**

Looking back at the transformation of the Bagbazar Bengali society from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, we note a few interesting socio-economic trends. In their relationship with the East India Company, the earliest residents of Bagbazar in the late seventeenth century first negotiated with it as traders. But then, lured by the prospect of quick money promised by the Company's traders, the next generation surrendered themselves to serve it as brokers and administrative agents. They thus paved the way for the Company's gradual entry into Bengali society. With its consolidation as a colonial power in Bengal after the defeat of Siraj-ud-dowlah in the Battle of Palashi (Plassey as described in the colonial narrative) in 1757, the Company began to groom a new generation of native subjects (by setting up schools and colleges to educate them in their language and values) so that they could be equipped with the necessary professional skills to serve its administrative interests, as well as shape Bengali society according to its moral norms. It was this newly educated generation of Bengali government employees, as well as independent professionals, who came to constitute the core of Bagbazar Street in the nineteenth century, while the joint families of the old Bengali dewans and mutsuddies (those who had made money as agents of the East India Company) fractured into separate units.

Keeping in tune, as it were, with these divisions and subdivisions in the old Bagbazar families, Bagbazar Street also got fragmented into strictly demarcated spaces, and gave birth to new lanes branching off from the main road. Under the term 'land use', as described in municipality records, certain spots in the locality were designated as 'build up areas' (where houses made from bricks and cement could be set up), some as 'market areas' (bazaars on portions of the street and its surroundings), some as 'open spaces' (like parks and tanks), and some as bustees (made up of squalid clusters of mud huts with thatched roofs or tin sheds). Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, Bagbazar Street had developed into a well-structured Bengali urban middle-class **(p.90)** territory through a reorganization of the old space. While the traditional palatial buildings of the mutsuddies and dewans on either side of the road became dilapidated, new *kotha-bari*s or small brick houses came up in the designated 'built-up' areas in the lanes and by-lanes behind the road. They were built and inhabited by Bengali middle-class people—subordinate officials in the colonial administration, lawyers, medical practitioners, and small landowners living off the earnings from their agricultural plots in neighbouring villages. Alongside these middle-class households, there grew the slums of thatched huts (bustees) inhabited by manual labourers who served the middle-class homes as servants, or worked as artisans (carpenters, tailors, and so forth). Interspersing these houses were grocery stores, drugstores, and sweetmeat shops (the latter in particular adding to the popularity of Bagbazar among those with sweet tooth!).

Houses in Bagbazar

These developments in the demographic composition and redistribution of space in Bagbazar are best reflected in some of the early twentieth-century records of residents of the road and its lanes. They suggest a comfortable coexistence among the various sections of its residents as well as frequent changes in the possession of premises. The changing status of the first premises on the right as we enter Bagbazar Street from the banks of the Hooghly River in the east is an interesting example. Numbered 1/1, this spot was occupied by petty shopkeepers till 1918, in which year we find it being described as owned by one V.R. Mondol, according to an English street directory.[13] We can hazard a guess in this instance. A storey was added over the ground floor of the shops, which could have provided residential accommodation for Mr Mondol. The original commercial spaces in Bagbazar thus gave way to their vertical expansion in the form of residential flats above them—sharing the same address. **(p.91)**

Most of the seventy-eight odd houses located on the main Bagbazar Street were primarily occupied by the new middle class (described above) who came from the Hindu upper and intermediary castes—as is discernible from their caste surnames of Chatterjee, Mukherjee, Battacharjee (upper-caste Brahmins), Dutta, Mitra, Bose, and Sen (from the intermediary castes). Interestingly enough, we also find a few middle-class people from the subordinate castes occupying houses on the main road. Thus, as mentioned earlier, the house numbered 1/1 in 1918 was occupied by V.R. Mondol (the surname suggesting subordinate caste origins—and the spelling of his first name probably indicating his possible conversion to Christianity, which allowed adoption of names like Victor, as well as upward mobility in those days). Another house numbered 2/1 was occupied by a family of Majumdars, who also ran a shop from the premises. A few yards ahead, house numbered 38/5 was occupied by a medical practitioner named Dr J.M. Karmakar (the surname originating from an artisan caste, some members from among whom gained access to higher education). Significantly enough, Dr Karmakar had as his neighbour an upper-caste Brahmin colleague in the same profession, one Dr K.G. Bhattacharjee, occupying the nearby premises at 37A Bagbazar Street. Does this indicate that the rural-based caste barriers were breaking down among the professional classes in the urban environs of Bagbazar?

Interestingly again, women possessed a number of properties on the main Bagbazar Street. From a street directory of 1915, we find one Rajkumari Dasi occupying house number 69/1 in a plot that some three years ago was described as ‘waste land’ in the records. A few yards away, the house numbered 71 was owned by another woman, Saradasundari Dasi. In 1918, we come across the names of two other female property owners—Kussum Kumari Dasi (of no. 22/1) and Khirode Sundari Debi (of no. 56/1).[14]

Who were these women? The distinctive by-names, commonly used in those days, to describe them—Dasi and Debi—indicate the class **(p.92)** differences (the former term literally meaning a female servant, and the latter a goddess, suggesting the higher status of women who were privileged to use that surname). Was Khirode Sundari Debi a widow who inherited the property from her husband's family? The house recorded in her name in 1918 belonged to one Chandramohan Ghosh in 1915. Did she belong to that family, or did she buy it from them? As for the 'Dasis' who were registered as owners of houses in Bagazar, were they independent, self-employed women, who were engaged in different occupations (like selling vegetables and fish, or manual labour, or as street vendors) and could accumulate enough savings to buy tiny plots in Bagbazar and build houses for themselves? Did the permissive urban social environs of Bagbazar provide more scope for individual rights of ownership for women? These are teasing questions that await answers from future researchers of Calcutta's history.

Shops and Establishments in Old Bagbazar

The shops and stores that operated in between the rows of these houses (or below the upper storeys) in the early decades of the twentieth century catered to the local needs of their residents. According to the street directories quoted above, there was a large number of medical clinics and chemist and druggist stores along the main road—like a medical dispensary run in 44 Bagbazar Street by Dr K.C. Dey, who was much sought after for the special 'mixture' that he made to cure malaria (which was a deadly disease in those days in the city), and a charitable hospital set up in 25 Bagbazar Street by a well-known philanthropist, zamindar Pashupatinath Basu. Some of the houseowners let out their premises to medical students, like Sureshchandra Mukhopadhyay, who ran the 'Belgachhia Medical School Mess' from 17 Bagbazar Street in 1915.

But it was the proliferation of sweet shops in the area that throws light on the gastronomic preferences of Bagbazar's residents. Of the **(p.93)** around seventy premises listed in the street directories of that period, at least a dozen or so were occupied by 'modak' or 'moira' families (confectioners who traditionally pursued the occupation of making and selling sweetmeats). We come across names like Haricharan Ghosh, Anukul Ghosh, Surendranath Ghosh (mainly from the traditional Bengali milkmen caste), and Keshab Chandra Modak, Surendranath Ghosh, Anadi Charan Modak among others, who ran confectionary shops from one end to the other of Bagbazar Street. They carried on the tradition of the famous Bhola Moira, Nabin Chandra Das, and other confectioners from the early nineteenth century (about whom we shall discuss later in this chapter). The rows of these residential quarters and shops were intersected by quite a few temples (built by the majority Bengali Hindu residents to meet the religious needs of their community). The confectioners, apart from their regular customers in the area, found a thriving market in these temples. Their priests needed sweetmeats from them, which constituted a part of the

prasad (food-offering to a deity which is taken away by the devotees after the worship) to be distributed among the visitors to the temples.

But the most necessary conduit to this middle-class settlement in Bagbazar was the bustee—the slum that housed the menials who served its needs. So, isolated bustees (like premises no. 9, or 22/1) were tolerated even in the middle of a row of respectable-looking houses on the main Bagbazar Street for many years, till the slum-dwellers were pushed, around 1918 or so, to a cluster of bustees in a huge conglomerate on the eastern extremity of Bagbazar Street near the Hooghly River. This site—no. 77—had always been a slum area, as designated in street directories from the earliest years of the twentieth century. With the influx of more slum-dwellers, ousted from the northern stretches of Bagbazar, it grew into a large bustee complex called Nikari Para, occupying some ten *bigha*s (a little over six acres), which survived till the 1940s.

Behind the highway, Bagbazar Street, houses sprung up in lanes and alleys winding away from it. They were carved out from the main road **(p.94)** under the increasing pressure of population, as well as with the growing divisions within the old families. As an example of the latter, the history of two lanes is worth recapitulating, which will also illustrate the style of living of these families and their later decline. One of the oldest aristocratic families of Bagbazar was the Boses, represented by Nandalal Bose (1846–1903) and his brother Pashupati Bose (1855–1907). Their father was a landlord, who had owned a huge estate in Gaya (in Bihar) and managed to make a fortune out of collecting rents from his tenants. Reaping the benefits of this fortune, in 1878, Nandalal built a palatial house on 65 Bagbazar Street. There was a blend of the Western architectural style in its façade and the traditional Bengal interior design in its domestic space, that was in vogue in those days. The façade at the entrance was marked by sixteen Doric columns decorated at the top with floral designs and heads of lions. The cast-iron railings surrounding the verandah were similarly carved with ornamental designs. But once visitors entered through the gates into the main building, instead of the Western parlour or living room, what greeted them was a huge hall known as *thakur dalan* in Bengali, meaning a space or courtyard for worship and prayer. This was a typical feature of old rich Bengali households in those days. Nandalal Bose's mansion still stands in Bagbazar—although in a dilapidated state.

Nandalal Bose's estate at one time stretched to the Marhatta Ditch Lane on the northern edge of Bagbazar Street. He had a lane sliced out from the main road behind his house, christening it with his own name, which still survives. But later, the paternal joint family of the Boses broke up, and through sales and transfers, the original estate dwindled to a few bighas. During Nandalal Bose's lifetime, his younger brother Pashupati decided to build a separate house parallel to Nandalal's. Then, a new lane was created around his house, bearing his name—Pashupati Bose Lane. The two lanes—Nandalal Bose Lane and

Pashupati Bose Lane—still continue to run alongside each other today, like two brothers.[15] **(p.95)**

Most of the lanes and streets that shot off from the main road of Bagbazar and housed the growing middle classes were built in the 1880s. They were originally cut out by clearing jungles or farmlands. Thus, Nebubagan Lane once used to be a site for the cultivation of lemons, or *lebu*, often pronounced 'nebu' by local Bengalis. Haralal Mitra Street ran through a farmland that was known as *kopi-bagan*, which produced cauliflowers. Kantapukur Lane was built after clearing the area called Kantapukur, or a forest of thorns. Here, in house number 8, lived Nagendranath Basu, the famous compiler of *Bishwakosh*, the Bengali encyclopedia.[16]

A distinct architectural feature of these Bengali houses in Bagbazar (and other parts of north Calcutta) was a pair of porches that stretched out from either side of the main entrance door right into the pavement. These porches, known as *rock* (a derivative from the Bengali word *roak*) in common parlance, were originally designed by the householders for sitting out in the open air in the evenings. Over the years, however, they became a part of the urban commons (like a park), with the householder sharing the site with his neighbours in the evenings to talk about everything under the sun—ranging from international politics to local gossip. They were later taken over by younger people. The poet Samar Sen, describing his days as a boy living in his ancestral house in Bishwakosh Lane (named after the encyclopedia *Bishwakosh*, compiled by Nagendranath Basu, mentioned earlier) in the 1920s, writes:

> On the two narrow porches hanging out from either side of the main door of Nagen Basu's house overlooking the street, there sat the young men of the locality in the mornings and evenings. The water well that faced the porches was the centre of congregation of domestic maids in the mornings, and prostitutes in the evenings (who gathered there to collect water). Many among them were physically well-endowed and attractive. The spot resounded with their amorous talks.[17]

With this coexistence of the descendants of the old aristocrats and the newly settled class of employees and professionals, traders and small **(p.96)** businessmen, Bagbazar began to acquire a unique position in the religious, cultural, and political spectrum of Bengali middle-class society from the end of the nineteenth century. It became a crossroad of sorts where all these three different streams met in a confluence—a 'triveni sangam' of religion, culture, and politics. The dilapidated rooms in the ruined mansions of the grandees were restored in order to host a new generation of Bengalis of different persuasions. There was the religious mystic Shri Ramakrishna and his famous disciple Vivekananda who preached their message from these houses. In the middle-class lanes and alleys behind Bagbazar Street, another group of radical Bengalis was

growing up, fashioning political tools of militant nationalism to overthrow British rule. Still another generation of Bengali middle class was emerging in the same alleys and passages, moulding a different tool—the cultural language of modern theatre. Some of the houses that hosted all these parallel trends of radical religious, political, and cultural developments in those days are still standing on either side of today's Bagbazar Street.

Bagbazar Sreet as a Pilgrimage Route

Situated on the banks of the Hooghly, Bagbazar had traditionally been a spot for pilgrims who came to the banks to pay homage to the 'Holy Ganga'. A number of temples had sprung up there since the seventeenth century. In the 1870s, however, it assumed a new religious importance with the arrival there of the mystic preacher Shri Ramakrishna. He was a priest who was employed in 1858 by a female zamindar, Rani Rashmoni, to look after a Kali temple that she built in Dakshineshwar, a village situated on the eastern banks of the Hooghly a few miles north of Calcutta. He gained a following among large sections of Bengalis ranging from old feudal aristocratic families to the new generation of English-educated professionals, clerks, and students. He was renowned for his piety, and lucid and witty exposition of spiritual matters. He thus helped revival of interest in Hinduism among these sections of bhadraloks.[18] **(p.97)**

A large number of Ramakrishna's devotees lived in and around Bagbazar Street. They invited him to their homes, which became occasions for public celebrations. By the 1880s, Ramakrishna had become a cult figure in Bagbazar being hosted by well-known residents like Dinanath Mukherjee, Balaram Bose, Chunilal Bose, and the earlier mentioned Nandalal Bose. In 1885, he visited Nandalal's famous palatial house to pay obeisance to the paintings of various Hindu gods and goddesses that adorned the walls of the hall or thakur dalan. Such visits attracted the middle-class neighbours who lived in the lanes behind. They met him and were drawn to him by his capacity to strike an immediate rapport with their day to day concerns, and by his offering them spiritual solace in commonsensical terms.

One such neighbour who was drawn to Ramakrishna was a young Bengali actor called Girish Ghosh. He lived in Bosepara Lane behind Bagbazar Street. He was a junior clerk employed in Atkinson's Company, a British commercial firm in Calcutta. But he devoted most of his time to reading Shakespeare, writing plays, and acting. Along with a few young enterprising friends, he set up a club of actors called the Bagbazar Amateur Theatre, and staged in 1869 the well-known contemporary Bengali play *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (written by Dinabandhu Mitra) in the hall of a house in Bagbazar. His directing and acting earned him accolades, and he soon emerged as a powerful actor, playwright, and theatre producer in late nineteenth-century Bengal. From his house in Bagbazar, where he wrote plays, composed songs, designed sets, rehearsed plays, and trained a generation of actors and actresses, Girish Ghosh set a new trend in the commercial stage of

Bengal by introducing socially relevant themes (instead of the traditional religious mythological stories) and issues of contemporary political interest.[19]

But while Girish Ghosh's house in Bagbazar became a cynosure for another group of pilgrims—theatre-lovers, aspiring actors, playwrights, and musicians who flocked to his home there—Girish himself suffered from personal problems. He had broken down due to a series of tragic **(p.98)** events in his private life—the untimely death of his wife and near ones and successive failures in his professional career following the collapse of the theatre companies that he set up. The constant move from one theatre company to another and the perpetual fights with owners of theatre halls not only disrupted his creative ventures, but also took their toll on his mental and physical health. Besides, he was always looked down upon by the conservative English-educated Bengali Hindu and Brahmo Samajist middle classes, which (influenced by the contemporary Victorian moralistic values) suspected that theatrical activities were immoral.

It was at this stage of his life in 1884 when he was forty years old, that Girish Ghosh met Ramakrishna at the house of one of the latter's disciples in Bagbazar. Girish was an inveterate sceptic and a compulsive alcoholic. But he somehow drifted into Ramakrishna's company. Maybe, both being mavericks—Ramakrishna in his unconventional behaviour as a religious preacher and Girish in his daring innovations on the stage as an actor–producer—they shared a common temperament. Ramakrishna embraced this rebel as his disciple. He even pardoned his drunken outbursts.[20]

Ironically enough, the house where Girish Ghosh lived is no longer there. A part of it has been converted to a building named 'Girish Bhavan'. In a belated effort to commemorate and rehabilitate the once-damned Girish Ghosh, the Calcutta Corporation in 1943 cut through the old Bagbazar Street and created an avenue, naming it Girish Avenue. Further west, on Bagbazar Street, a theatre hall has been established carrying his name, known as Girish Mancha.

One of Girish's friends was a young man named Narendranath Dutta. He was also drawn to Ramakrishna and became his disciple, to be known as Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda institutionalized Ramakrishna's message by setting up a mission and attracted disciples from different parts of the world. An Irish woman, Margaret Noble, was one of his disciples, who came to be known as Sister Nivedita. Both Vivekananda and Nivedita chose Bagbazar Street as their centre of activities. It was in **(p.99)** Bagbazar that Vivekananda was given a grand reception on his return from England (where he went on a lecture tour) in February 1897. The two Bose brothers—Nandalal and Pashupati, who were then still sharing the same ancestral house—opened up their majestic mansion in Bagbazar Street for the reception. But Vivekananda, being a down-to-earth person, refused to be swept off his feet by the praise that was showered upon him at the reception. Addressing the gathering at the Bose household, he said:

‘There’s been enough of religious propaganda in our country. What we need now is education. The primary requirements today are—clean and neat clothes for the common people, two full meals a day, and literacy to enable them to earn their living.’[21]

As a follow-up to this message, a few months later, on 1 May that year, Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission Association. Again, for this important occasion, he chose the aristocratic environs of the house of Balaram Bose (a few yards south of Bagbazar Street) to make the announcement. Incidentally, Balaram Bose, like Nandalal and Pashupati, was a descendant of an old eighteenth-century Bengali family that made money by collaborating with the then British rulers and receiving *dewani*, or administrative rights, over the Hooghly estate, under the East India Company.[22]

Soon after the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission in November 1898, Vivekananda’s English disciple Nivedita rented a house in the middle-class environs of Bagbazar—16 Bosepara Lane—away from the Bengali aristocratic houses on the main road, and started a school for girls there. This was an important move in the direction of educating and training of women in skills—another part of Vivekananda’s mission.

Why did Vivekananda choose Bagbazar to start his mission of social activities on his return from England? One, he could rely on the patronage of the rich gentry of Bagbazar Street who were devotees of Ramakrishna as evident from his choice of the houses of Nandalal Bose and Balaram Bose as venues for his meetings. Two, there was a new generation of **(p.100)** Bengali middle class youth—students, lawyers, teachers, doctors—who had started various social activities in Bagbazar. Vivekananda hoped to reach out to them as allies in his mission of social reform. Some among these youth, long before Vivekananda’s arrival on the scene, had set up social institutions. In 1883, they established a reading room for the poor people of Bagbazar so that they could gain free access to daily newspapers. This was known as the Bagbazar Reading Library, which was to play a major role in the politicization of the residents. Even before that, in 1874, a young journalist, Shishir Ghosh, began to edit a Bengali journal called *Amrita Bazar Patrika* from Ananda Chatterjee Lane behind Bagbazar Street. From its beginning, the journal was fiercely anti-colonial, exposing the misdeeds of British officials in its reports and urging for self-rule in its editorials. This provoked the British administration to clamp down upon the journal, as well as other Bengali papers that were critical of British rule. In March 1878, it enacted the Vernacular Press Act, which imposed censorship on news journals printed in Bengali. In a deft move in order to escape the provisions of the act, Shishir Ghosh immediately switched over the publication of his paper into English. It continued to publish anti-colonial reports and views, and its editor had to face a series of prosecutions by the colonial administration. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, from its office in Ananda Chatterjee Lane, remained the medium of communication for

Bagbazar's radical politics and Indian nationalism. Thus, Bagbazar had already become a fertile soil for Vivekananda's radical dreams when he arrived there on his return from England.

Bagbazar Street—from Religious Pilgrimage to Radical Political Hub

As we enter the twentieth century, we find that Bagbazar had changed from a religious pilgrimage and a quiet neighbourhood of a laid-back style of aristocratic living to a volatile centre of political upsurge against British rule. Ironically enough, the change was partly due to **(p.101)** Vivekananda's entry in Bagbazar as a religious reformer. He acted as a catalyst, turning the religious fervour into a political direction. He inspired a generation of local young social activists who went beyond the traditional Hindu cloistered existence of religious meditation and moved increasingly towards militant nationalism.

Interestingly, this conduit between Vivekananda's religio-social movement and the political activities of his radical followers was provided by his Irish disciple Sister Nivedita. She herself came from the background of the Irish nationalist movement, and was said to have established contacts with the Bengali militant nationalists who were resorting to armed retaliation against the British plan to partition Bengal in 1905. When she went back to England in 1907, she was reported to have met an Indian revolutionary, Girindranath Mukherjee, who was on the run and offered him shelter. She came back to Calcutta in 1909 and set up at her old residence in Bosepara Lane. The house soon became a centre for the meetings of Bengali militant nationalists in the early years of the twentieth century. Several years later (on 22 April 1914), the British police chief of Calcutta, Charles Tegart, in a report tracing the roots of armed nationalist resistance in Bengal, mentioned the role of members of the Ramakrishna Mission and Sister Nivedita in particular: 'There have been several indications that the (Ramakrishna) Mission and its followers are connected with the revolutionary side of the recent political upheaval in India.' About Nivedita, he wrote: 'She dressed in semi-native fashion and went bare-headed and without shoes.' He then added in the typically sexist patriarchal manner of damning female dissidents: 'As from all accounts she did not bear a good moral character.'[23]

Bagbazar's radical politics found a new outlet in 1905, when Lord Curzon, the then British governor general, announced his plan to divide Bengal—ostensibly for streamlining the administration, but literally leading to a Hindu–Muslim divide among the Bengali population.

The plan stirred up a popular movement. The Bengali nationalist leader Surendranath Banerjee led the agitation from a house located **(p.102)** in 25 Bagbazar Street—the premises lent to him by its owner Pashupati Bose (a commissioner of the Calcutta Municipality, well known for his patronage of music and philanthropic acts)—on 16 October 1905, the day when Bengal was to

be officially divided. Several thousand people gathered there, and a sum of 20,000 rupees was collected from them for the setting up of a National Fund to carry on the anti-partition agitation. A contemporary Bengali journal reported that the money was raised from ‘petty subscriptions of a pice or two each from poor people, coolies, porters, coachmen, beggars and the like’.[24]

Who were these poor people of Bagbazar? Let us turn our attention to them.

Bagbazar’s Underclasses

Till now, we have talked about the English colonizers, the native aristocrats, and the latter-day Bengali middle-class social and political leaders who resided in and around Bagbazar Street. But where would a city be without its poor? Were there no poor, there would be no rich. The poor accompanied Bagbazar in its progress. The Bengali rich and middle classes needed the poor, since they supplied casual labour and cheap goods. As mentioned earlier, that was why the Nikari Para slum grew up at one end of Bagbazar. The underclass provided the upper classes with their daily needs as masons building their houses, as artisans designing their furniture, as pedlars selling vegetables and other daily essentials, and above all, as confectioners producing sweetmeat, for which Bagbazar became famous.

Let me begin with one such member of the poorer classes who was a resident of Bagbazar Street during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. He was known as Bhola Moira (Bhola, the sweetmeat maker), and ran a confectionary at the eastern end of Bagbazar Street. According to an old resident-historian of Bagbazar: ‘Bhola Moira’s shop was located in a thatched hut between the house of … Babu Bhagabaticharan **(p.103)** Ganguli, a rich and well-known man of Bagbazar in his times … and the printing press of the celebrated civilian and Sanskrit scholar Anandaram Barua.’[25] Trying to trace the spot of Bhagabaticharan’s house from old sources, one can locate its origins in the present site on the part of the western side of Bagbazar Street that starts from the conjunction of Bosepara Lane and today’s Girish Avenue Post Office. Bhola Moira’s shop must have been situated somewhere here.

But besides following his family profession of making and supplying sweets to the residents of Bagbazar, Bhola Moira spent most of his time as a street singer entertaining the populace. He was part of an organized form of urban folk entertainment which was known as *kobi-gan* in those days. This form entailed a type of slanging match in songs between two groups of singers, each led by a *kobi* or poet, who could extemporize verses during the contest. Bhola Moira emerged as a champion in such contests. Some of his songs, which were handed down from one generation to another in Bengali oral culture, give us an idea of the environs of Bagbazar Street of those days. In one such song, he describes his occupation: ‘*Ami Moira Bhola, bhiyan khola, Bagbajare bash, Kadma kori, tilua kori, moira-i-baro mash*’ (I am a sweetmeat-seller, fry sweets in a pan, and live in

Bagbazar. I make cookies in the shape of the kadam flower, toffees out of sesame seeds, and I am a sweetmeat-maker all through the year). Bhola then proceeds to describe his other role as a street singer—where he spends whatever he earns on singing contests with other kobis. He admits that he is not a great poet like Kalidasa. But he dares to challenge any kobi, irrespective of their caste.[26]

But Bhola Moira also made a name in Bagbazar as a confectioner. This attracted many other members of his profession to the area. Among them was a young man called Nabin Chandra Das, who came from a family of confectioners. He first started a sweet shop in the neighbouring Jorasanko area. But after failing to make any headway, he shifted to Bagbazar in 1866, where he found a new clientele. Like in many other fields, in the area of confectionary too the residents of Bagbazar Street **(p.104)** were open to experiments and adventures. Nabin Chandra offered them a new product to tease their tastebuds. Till then, Bengalis were used to, and fond of, the *sandesh* (a dry sweet made of posset or cottage cheese). Nabin introduced to them the now-famous *rasogolla* (a juicy sweetmeat made from posset and farina, which includes flour).[27] Nabin Chandra's son Krishna Chandra Das (famously known as K.C. Das) helped the spread of their renown by bringing in another innovation—packing *rasogolla*s in preservatives in air-tight tins and exporting them abroad. His descendants are still operating from Bagbazar.

But there were other toilers in Bagbazar who were less fortunate than Bhola or Nabin Das. The majority among them were menials who worked in the rich and middle-class households, or as street vendors, sweepers and scavengers, and manual labourers engaged in transportation, like palanquin-bearers, coachmen driving horse carriages, bullock-cart drivers carrying goods, boatmen, and porters. They lived in slums—squalid clusters of mud huts with thatched or tiled roofs on the western end of Bagbazar Street and the alleys behind it. According to contemporary British official accounts of the nineteenth century, each of these huts accommodated 'some eight or ten households',[28] and their diet consisted of 'boiled rice, green pepper pods, and boiled herbs; the step above this is a little oil with the rice'.[29]

The road—Bagbazar Street—was their living space as well as working place. It was their site for cultural entertainments (like the popular *kobir larai*—a form of verbal duel between two poets, exchanging repartees and singing impromptu verses accompanied by music—performances by Bhola Moira), as well as rebellion against the established order. As described earlier (in Chapter 2), Calcutta's roads had had a long history of protests by manual transporters (for example, the strike by palanquin-bearers in 1827; the strike by bullock-cart drivers in 1851). The underclass of Bagbazar Street carried on this tradition of protest, when in August 1856, the boatmen (who lived in the Bagbazar slums) carrying goods along the Circular Canal, north to Bagbazar Street, refused **(p. 105)** to ply in protest against police highhandedness. As a result, essential

commodities like rice stopped coming to Bagbazar and other parts of the northern town, where the residents faced distress. The traders, who also suffered losses due to the strike, came out in support of the boatmen, and they held a demonstration in front of the Governor's House in Calcutta, demanding that the then Governor General Lord Canning stop the atrocities on the boatmen.[30]

The poor of Bagbazar have carried on this tradition of protest even till recent times. The most memorable was their movement against the eviction of slum-dwellers of Nikari Para in 1945. It had been the dwelling place mainly of Muslim fishermen, among other manual labourers. The landlord of the slum at that time was a Hindu called Haridas Saha. He tried many times to evict the dwellers. However, with the help of some local Communist leaders and activists, the slum-dwellers managed to resist the eviction. Their main demand was that there could be no evictions without their rehabilitation. But in 1946, when Hindu–Muslim communal riots broke out, Haridas Saha took the opportunity of the riots and set fire to the slum, evicting the people.[31]

In the 1950s, with growing land prices, many such landlords wanted to clear their lands of these slums and sell those plots to building agents for a hefty price. While some among the slum-dwellers agreed to move out after receiving adequate compensation or rehabilitation in other areas, many continued to stick to their old habitations under the protection of the middle-class families to whose daily needs they catered. Even today, therefore, we find clusters of slums rubbing shoulders with well to do households in Bagbazar.

Bagbazar Street Today

This brings us to today's Bagbazar Street. The horizontal continuity of the old street was fractured in the early twentieth century by the laying down of Girish Avenue in the west. But otherwise, the topography and **(p.106)** the environs of the main thoroughfare remain the same. If we walk down Bagbazar Street from the west (from its crossing with Shambazar), we shall find on either side of the road traces of the past—architectural ruins left by a feudal gentry, parts of which are now inhabited by their descendants and parts are rented out to shopkeepers or other tenants. Temples, small and big (mainly of Kali), dot the landscape. The same old types of trades are operated from the ground floors of these houses—small shops (of grocers, tailors, and carpenters, among others) and eating joints catering to the daily needs of the residents (the most popular being the traditional sweetmeat sellers from the days of Bhola Moira and Nabin Das). A few new trades have come up in recent years—the ubiquitous Xerox stalls and phone booths.

As we reach the end of the road nearing the Hooghly, we find the old bazaars still occupying both sides of the road. There are the vegetable sellers hawking and haggling over their goods, the butchers inviting the meat-lover by tossing

the thighs of a goat that has just been sacrificed at some Kali temple on the banks of the holy Ganga, and the flower sellers gently opening up their bouquet of fragrant champak, padma, and other varieties, which are bought by the devotees who go to the same temples to use them as offerings to the mighty mother goddess. If we go further ahead, cross Chitpur Road, and reach the banks of the Hooghly River, known as Bagbazar Ghat, we find boats carrying both freight and passenger and people bathing and coming up the steps of the ghat, some of them pausing to pay obeisance at one or two temples there—one said to be patronized by Sarada Ma, the consort of Ramakrishna.

As for the houses in and behind Bagbazar Street, they have changed hands over the years, indicating the demographic transformation in the composition of the inhabitants in some places, continuity in some other lanes and streets, and new socio-cultural trends emerging in yet other parts of the road. The premises no. 1/1, which were once occupied by one V.R. Mondal in 1918 (as described earlier), were later expanded **(p.107)** both horizontally by constructions on the neighbouring vacant land and vertically by building upper storeys on the original structure. By the 1930s, according to the street directories, there were at least half a dozen separate houses/flats occupying that space, and bearing numbers like 1, 1/1, 1/1-A, and so forth. They were owned or rented by Hindu–Bengali families like the Roys, Mitras, and Banerjees. Today, those premises, although still bearing the old numbers, have been taken over by *sankhari*s or conch shell–makers who have set up a long line of shops selling conches (played by women devotees in the nearby temples) and bangles (worn by married Hindu women). These new owners are artisan families who had migrated from East Bengal after the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.

Similarly, a few yards ahead on the same road, premises no. 2/1/1A, which in the 1930s were owned by a lady called Jagattarini Debi, are today occupied by Shibdas Guha, who has put up a signboard describing his profession—‘clay modeller’. When we enter the lanes and by-lanes behind the main road, we discover further changes. Bosepara Lane, where Sister Nivedita set up her school, was inhabited some hundred years ago by a few Bengali–Hindu families like the Gossains, Boses, Banerjees, and Mukherjees, whose houses were interspersed with vast stretches of wasteland and a number of horse stables. Today, like other neighbouring alleys, it is a densely crowded lane with houses rubbing shoulders with each other and rising to two or three storeys.

Yet, despite the increase in population (of a little over 20,000), one does not find in Bagbazar high-rise residential complexes, sprawling shopping malls, and flyovers that are sweeping over the rest of Calcutta. The only signs of the twenty-first century here are, first the Metro railway station at the crossing of the road with Upper Circular Road and Bidhan Sarani on its western end, and second, a two-storeyed department store run by Raymonds (popular clothes brand) next to the station. Till a few years ago, the ubiquitous nexus of realty

agents who are ready to pounce upon old properties to buy them and contractors who **(p.108)** build multistoreyed building complexes on these plots, had been absent in Bagbazar Street.

While trying to find out in the course of my earlier survey in 2003 the reason for the absence of realtor and contractors, I came across an interesting fact. The proprietors of a large number of these old houses on the road are perennially engaged in court cases either over the legal possession of the property amidst contesting claims of inheritance by their own relatives (known as *sariki-bibad,* or a fight among members of the same family) or over disputes on rent with tenants. Settlement of such court cases, as is well known, takes years. No realtor, therefore, would burn his fingers by entering Bagbazar Street!

But during my survey in 2013, I found new trends indicating the changing direction of Bagbazar's residential topography. Although real estate agents have not yet appeared on the scene, Bagbazar is gradually opening itself up to different types of commercial investments. Its old dilapidated palatial buildings, which were being suffered as useless encumbrances by the descendants of their ancient owners, have all of a sudden found a new class of patrons. The huge mansion of Nandalal Bose (the historical associations of which have been described earlier in this chapter), for instance, remains in a decrepit condition today. The present members of the family apparently find it difficult to maintain the vast property. In the absence of any help from the state, which should have taken over the responsibility of maintaining it as a heritage spot, a new class of commercial entrepreneurs has come to its rescue. A north Indian business house is reported to be negotiating with its present owners to renovate it (while preserving its old architectural façade), convert a part of it into a heritage hotel, and organize trips for tourists (both Indian and foreign) to help them get an idea of the living style of Bengali grandees during the (English colonial) Raj—stories about which continue to fascinate middle-class Bengalis, as well as certain sections of European society. Nandalal Bose's ancestral house has become a marketable commodity in the **(p.109)** business of international tourism, and thus Bagbazar is being drawn into the present era of globalization.

Changing Religious and Cultural Contours

Like its residential areas, Bagbazar's socio-cultural life is also undergoing a change. This change is largely being determined by a new generation of local Bengali residents and their political and commercial patrons.

As we described earlier, Bagbazar Street had been a hub of religio-cultural activities for ages. Situated on the banks of the Hooghly (a distributary of the Ganges, which is worshipped by the Hindus), it drew pilgrims, for whose needs temples sprung up on the main road as well as in its alleys. These temples were mostly dedicated to Shiva or his consort Kali. The main religious festivals were Durga and Kali pujas (observed during fixed periods of the year), and some pujas

in honour of the same mother goddess who was worshipped in different forms by members of a variety of occupations (like Jagaddhatri, or Vishwakarma deified by the artisan classes like masons and carpenters, among others).

During the last three decades—from the 1980s till today—these popular religious festivities have acquired new dimensions. The Jagaddhatri Puja, for instance, has now become a mass festival of sorts (known as *sarbajanin puja* in Bengali). Apart from the traditional Kali Puja, a new form of Kali, known as Paush Kali, has emerged in recent years, who is worshipped in an annual public ceremony on the main Bagbazar Street. The deity Ganesha, who used to be worshipped primarily by north Indian trading communities within the precincts of their shops, has also become an object of mass adulation by the Bengali residents of Bagbazar in the public sphere. The transformation of community-based deities into mass icons, and the addition of new idols (like Paush Kali) to the list of divinities have led to the proliferation of vast gatherings on Bagbazar Street, where one god or another is worshipped almost every month. As one resident of the street put it during an interview with **(p.110)** the present author: ‘Loudspeakers are now permanently fixed to lamp posts, since every now and then there is some puja or other, and the organizers broadcast religious songs or make announcements of the auspicious moments when pujas should be offered.’[32]

But these pujas become occasions not only for demonstrating religious devotion, but also for brisk trade for small shopkeepers who set up stalls on the pavements for the duration of the puja. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that these latest forms of pujas in the public space of Bagbazar Street have been started by local political leaders, and are financially supported by small Bengali firms engaged in the hospitality business, tourism, and ‘chit fund’ schemes (a form of financial transaction where the entrepreneur collects money from small-scale investors and pays them a certain interest). They provide local politicians with an opportunity to demonstrate their power and create a space for their publicity (by inaugurating the puja and then delivering speeches where they project themselves as the protectors and saviours of the local inhabitants—as prototypes of the ancient, or newly invented, divinities that they are worshipping today). But more importantly, these public pujas also offer their commercial sponsors a vast space for advertising their goods and services. Every idol that is set up in such religious congregations has as its backdrop huge hoardings and signboards bearing the portrait of the local political leader and advertisements of the business firm which sponsors it.

The Future of Bagbazar Street

While changes are indeed taking place in Bagbazar Street, will they turn it into a twenty-first century megalopolitan highway? This leads us into the deeper problem of the curious autonomy of a road.

Every road has unique features, carrying distinct imprints of historical changes in the past, assuming new traits from the present, and yet resisting those that do not suit its needs. Due to its geographically **(p.111)** determined location, a road cannot always be moulded to fit the wishes of the city planners of a centralized economy. It interacts more with the local natural environs and needs of its inhabitants rather than the rules of a central power. Chandni Chowk of old Delhi, for instance, cannot be turned into a clone of Connaught Circus of New Delhi. Similarly, Bagbazar Street cannot be overhauled and its lanes and houses dismantled to make way for a road that will resemble either an avenue designed by Le Corbusier or a modern highway for commercial traffic. Today, as a grandmother, Bagbazar Street can only take pride in having been the first such highway some three hundred years ago.

Notes:

(1.) Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976). Also see Swami Purnatmananda, ed., *Dhanya Bagbazar* (Calcutta: Rabindranath Basu Memorial Trust, 1998).

(2.) Swami Purnatmananda, *Dhanya Bagbazar*. Charles Perrin’s garden started from the present Haralal Mitra Street (an offshoot of the main Bagbazar Street) on the east and terminated at Chitpur Road near the Ganges on the west. After buying it from Perrin, the East India Company retained it till 1752. It was then sold off to Mr Holwell for 2,500 rupees, as it was ‘much out of repair and of no use to any of the covenanted servants’ (vide ‘Consultations of Government dated 20th November, 1752’). Mr Holwell later sold the garden to Colonel C.F. Scott, commandant of the garrison, and father of Warren Hasting’s first wife. (Re: Purnachandra De Udbhatsagar, ‘Calcutta of Old: Its Streets and Lanes—II’, in the *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, 25 December 1926).

(3.) ‘Fort William Consultation of Monday, March 29, 1731’, quoted in C.R. Wilson, *Old Fort William in Bengal*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1906), p. 134.

(4.) Major F.C. Hirst, *A Brief History of the Large Scale Survey of Calcutta and Its Neighbourhood, 1903–14* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1914), and *Plan of Calcutta (1784–85)* by Lt Col. Mark Wood, available at puronokolkata.com/tag/old-Calcutta-maps, last accessed 13 July 2016.

(5.) Swami Purnatmananda, *Dhanya Bagbazar*.

(6.) Revenue Department, Governor General in Council Proceedings, 23 January 1778. Quoted in Soumitra Srimani, *Anatomy of a Colonial Town: Calcutta, 1756–1794* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1994).

(7.) Srimani, *Anatomy of a Colonial Town*.

(8.) Ajit Kumar Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath: Samajey O Sanskrititey* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd, 2008), pp. 28–9.

(9.) The doggerel made fun of four important personalities of eighteenth-century Calcutta: '*Banamali Sarkarer bari, Gobindaram Mitrer chhodi, Amirchander daari, Hajuri Maler kodi*.' Banamali Sarkar was a Bengali dewan to the East India Company, who built a palatial *bari* or building in Kumartoli in north Calcutta; Gobindaram Mitra, another Bengali dewan who was notorious for wielding his *chhodi* or cane, was also a resident of Kumartoli; Amirchand was a Punjabi Sikh who set up business in Calcutta and apparently struck the citizens with his flowing *daari* or beard; his brother-in-law Hajuri Mal inherited his business and emerged as the richest Indian in Calcutta—famous for his *kodi* or wealth. For a fuller account of Gobindaram Mitra's career, see the present author's *The Wicked City: Crime and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011).

(10.) Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Bismrita Darpan* (Calcutta: Punashcha, 2001).

(11.) Quoted in Pramatha Nath Mullick, *Kolikatar Katha*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: 1935), p. 148.

(12.) *Report on the Census of the Town of Calcutta Taken on the 6th April 1876* (C.S. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1876).

(13.) *Kolikata Street Directory, 1915* (Kolkata: P.M. Bagchi & Company Private Limited, 2015); *Thacker's Calcutta Diary* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1918).

(14.) *Kolikata Street Directory, 1915*; *Thacker's Calcutta Diary*.

(15.) Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*, pp. 101–5.

(16.) Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*.

(17.) Samar Sen: *Babu Brittanta* (Calcutta: Asha Prakashani, 1978).

(18.) Sumit Sarkar, *An Exploration of the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Tradition* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993).

(19.) For Girish Ghosh's life and career, see Abinash Chandra Gangopadhyay, *Girishchandra* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1993).

(20.) One such popular story, which is a part of the Girish–Ramakrishna folklore, runs as follows: One evening, when Girish came to Ramakrishna, stinking drunk, throwing up, and abusing Ramakrishna using four-letter words, an indulgent Ramakrishna calmed his other disciples who were angry with Girish by

reassuring them that by such outbursts Girish was only purging himself of the sins that he had committed!

(21.) Quoted in Swami Purnatmananda, *Dhanya Bagbazar*, p. 712.

(22.) Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath*, pp. 378–9.

(23.) Quoted in Swami Purnatmananda, *Dhanya Bagbazar*, p. 149.

(24.) *Sandhya*, 17 October 1905.

(25.) Udbhatsagar, 'Calcutta of Old'.

(26.) Quoted in Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets, Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1989).

(27.) There is an apocryphal story about how Nabin's *rasogolla* became a commercial success. One hot summer afternoon, a horse carriage happened to stop by his shop in Bagbazar. Its occupant was a rich businessman of Calcutta called Bhagwandas Bagla. His young son who was accompanying him was feeling very thirsty. Nabin offered him a glass of water. But as is the custom in Bengali families, one also has to offer sweets to guests. Nabin felt that he could not give the dry and thick sandesh to the thirsty child. So he offered him his newly invented rasogolla, which was juicy. The little one had a bite and that bowled him over! His father also bit into it soon after and ever since then the addiction for rasogolla has spread from Bagbazar to different parts of the world. (Swami Purnatmananda, *Dhanya Bagbazar*.)

(28.) H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of the Town of Calcutta Taken on the 6th of April 1876* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1876).

(29.) James Ranald Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1837).

(30.) *Sambad Bhashkar*, 2 and 9 August 1856.

(31.) Interview with Ram Choubey, 6 February 1989, in *Basti Movement in Calcutta: Housing Struggle of Basti Dwellers in the 1950s in Calcutta* (Calcutta: Unnayan, 1992).

(32.) The present writer's interview with Prasun Bandyopadhyay, a descendant of the famous nineteenth-century playwright Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode (who lived in Bagbazar), on 8 January 2013. Much of the information relating to the current socio-cultural trends in Bagbazar Street, as described earlier and later, was collected from Bandyopadhyay, and supplemented by the present writer's experiences during strolls along the road in 2013.

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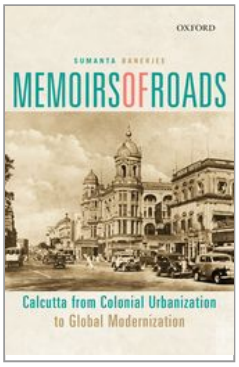

Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Modernization
Sumanta Banerjee

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Theatre Road

The Midwife

Sumanta Banerjee

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Abstract and Keywords

Theatre Road ushered in the settlement of the White Town through the colonial reconstruction of a village path, named after a theatre which was set up by the British settlers there in the early years of the nineteenth century. By then, they had built bungalows for themselves, occupied lands and rented them out to Indian menials who worked for them as domestics, and who built slums in the neighbourhood. After Independence, these houses changed hands from the British owners (who left India) to Indian business houses. The old Victorian bungalows have now been demolished to make way for multi-storeyed residential complexes and sprawling shopping malls.

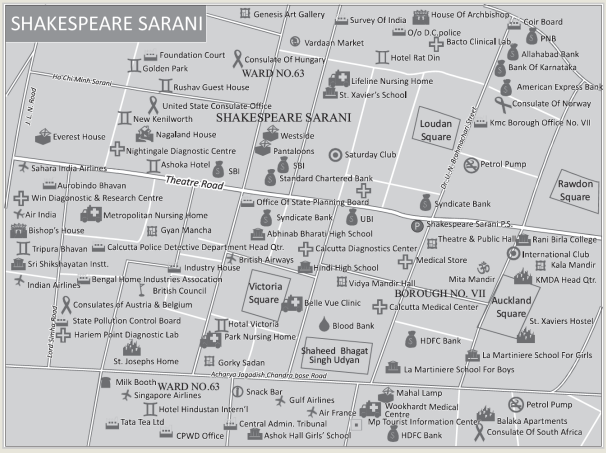
Keywords: Theatre, slums, Victorian bungalows, British entrepreneurs, slums

The road bearing this name (at present known as Shakespeare Sarani) was originally an obscure pathway that ran from the west to the east through the jungles of Birji, which was situated further down to the south-east of Gobindapur village. Till the mid-eighteenth century, it was still a mud road devoid of any amenities. The 1742 map prepared by A. Upjohn shows the road stretching from the borders of modern Chowringhee on the west, to the boundaries of what was known then as the Marhatta Ditch on the east.[1]

It was developed after the clearance of the Birji jungles by English settlers in the 1770s. According to old records, in 1776, a sum of 125 rupees was paid to one Mr Fortnam, described as a ‘civil architect’, for the purpose of making ‘one

water-course (that is, an open drain) in the Chowringhee Road', which ran parallel to Birji. This enabled the English residents of this road to gain access to civic amenities like drainage. Over the next hundred years, the road was further developed and it acted as a midwife, as it were, giving birth to a European settlement, which became an important part of Calcutta's White Town culture. It was here in 1818 that the British inhabitants built a hall called the Chowringhee Theatre that drew both actors and audiences from the contemporary European residents of the city. This is how the **(p.115)** road acquired the name Theatre Road. The theatre house was situated at the corner of the road where it met the arterial Chowringhee Road (that ran from the north to the south). The building was accidentally destroyed in a fire in 1839.[2] But the road continued to be described as Theatre Road in official municipality records and newspaper reports. Among the local Indian inhabitants (mainly manual labourers and domestics hired by the European residents) in the nineteenth century, it was known as 'Purana Nautchghar-ka-rasta' (literally translated into English as the 'road of old dance-drama performances').[3] But the English name survived officially till 1964, when the Calcutta municipality authorities decided to rename the road Shakespeare Sarani to commemorate the quarter centenary of the Bard's birth anniversary (see Map 4.1).

(p.116) However, in their daily conversations, the Bengali citizens of today's Calcutta continue to use the old name Theatre Road when referring to the road. This indicates the persistence of a traditional collective socio-cultural psyche that takes a long time to adopt new names for roads. In an indirect way, it also reflects the collective reluctance to adopt new socio-cultural norms that are imposed on their environs. At the same time, the topography of Theatre Road is changing according to the needs of the present regime of neo-liberal economy. The old Victorian-type bungalows that were once inhabited by Europeans have given way to multistoreyed buildings that house commercial establishments, banks, and shopping complexes.



Map 4.1 Shakespeare Sarani, 2016

Source: Courtesy of the author.

Theatre Road and Its Neighbourhood in the Past

Even before the road took its name (from the Chowringhee Theatre), British officials and merchants had begun to clear the forests and settle down around this nameless village path from the end of the eighteenth century. Their main

interest was to invest in the plans of further southward urbanization that the East India Company was contemplating at that time. They built houses, scattered here and there, and kept some spots clear for future development. Their investment proved to be successful, since this settlement of theirs in Theatre Road and its neighbourhood soon attracted a lot of Europeans as well as Indians.

The streets and lanes that are found to be crisscrossing Theatre Road today still carry the names of these early speculators. Thus, Camac Street is named after Lieutenant William Camac, a late eighteenth-century engineer officer. He took up land in the hitherto unbuilt in locality in this area and 'erected dwelling houses as a speculation'.[4] Camac inserted the following advertisement in a newspaper in 1788: 'For sale, that upper-roomed garden house with about five bighas of land, on the road leading from Chowringhee to the burial ground, **(p. 117)** which formally belonged to the Moravians. It is very private from the number of trees on the ground, and having lately received considerable additions and repairs, is well adapted for a black family.'[5] It appears, therefore, that certain parts of the White Town around this area during this period were also up for sale for well-to-do Bengali families from the Black Town, who wanted to move into this neighbourhood—a trend that marked the later history of this region.

Among other such English residents of this part of the town whose names are still borne by streets and lanes was Henry Wood. A street running through Theatre Road and parallel to Camac Street is named after him and is now divided into two portions: Wood Street and Upper Wood Street. He was apparently an important personality with access to the East India Company administrators. We learn from old records that on 13 July 1818, he brought to the notice of the Lottery Committee (which was set up by the administrators to reconstruct the topography of Calcutta by cleaning the city and laying down new roads among other things) 'the inadequate manner in which the establishment entertained for the purpose performed its duty in removing the filth.'[6]

Wood Street is also remembered for its associations with the Orientalist Henry Stuart—an eccentric Englishman who professed himself to be a devotee of Indian gods, carried his idols about him, and set up a museum in this street.[7]

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Theatre Road was making a niche for itself in the town which was expanding towards the south. Although, according to a contemporary census report, it was 'thinly populated and the houses of the Europeans widely scattered', its residents were gathering together to avail themselves of civic facilities. We learn that in 1818, the road was being watered from the corner of Dharamtala Street (in the north of the White Town)

up to the Chowringhee Theatre. This operation was carried out by means of subscriptions raised from among the residents of the locality.[8]

(p.118) Birth of the Footpath and Railroad

Coming to the middle of the nineteenth century, we find further improvements in the locality. In 1840, the building of St Paul's Cathedral, on a spot that straddled Chowringhee and Birji, attracted the European Christian population from other parts of the town. This led to the provision of better pedestrian facilities. One such facility was the introduction of the first footpath in Calcutta. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, it was laid down in 1858 in the Chowringhee–Theatre Road area by filling up the open drain that used to run along the length of Chowringhee Road on its eastern side neighbouring Theatre Road.

Civic facilities in Theatre Road improved further from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Earlier, the night soil from the households and the garbage from the streets used to be carried away by Indian mehtars or scavengers in bullock carts. In order to spare the white residents the malodorous experience, the municipal authorities built a railway in 1867 to cart away the refuse to dump it into the swamps of Dhapa on the north-eastern outskirts of Calcutta. The 'Dhapa Mail', as the train was known, ran from Theatre Road and its neighbouring areas of the White Town to Bagbazar Street in the Black Town in the north—to finally end in the garbage dump at Dhapa in the north-east. Thus, it was waste disposal which brought together these two roads from the White Town and the Black Town in a rather tenuous relationship through a modern means of road transport—the railways in this case.

In Black and White

Theatre Road and its lanes from their beginning had been marked by an uncomfortable but symbiotic relationship between their white and black residents. As mentioned earlier (in Chapters 1 and 2), the British **(p.119)** entrepreneurs who had settled here earned profits from the East India Company by renting out parts of their plots to destitute immigrants from the neighbouring village of Gobindapur (where the building of the new Fort William led to their displacement in the eighteenth century). The Company resettled these immigrants in these plots, where they built slums (bustees). The slums were, however, known by the names of their British owners. We thus find names like Colvin's Bustee (spreading from 6/9 Theatre Road to 2 Lower Circular Road); Short's Bustee on 15 Theatre Road; Duncan's Bustee on Wood Street (behind Theatre Road); and Hill's Bazaar Bustee on 23 Theatre Road. The slum-dwellers primarily worked as menials in the houses of the European residents, or as local artisans.[9]

Along with hosting members of the black labouring classes in the bustees, Theatre Road and its lanes opened themselves up also to Indian investors and potential residents from the early nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier, in

1835 Dwarkanath Tagore bought the premises of Chowringhee Theatre when it faced bankruptcy (see last paragraph of Chapter 1).[10] From early twentieth-century records, we find a gradual influx of Bengalis and Indians, among other communities, into Theatre Road and its outlying streets. During the first three decades of the century, the demographic composition of the neighbourhood became more cosmopolitan, marked by the entry of ambassadors from Latin America, Persia, and other countries. North Indian Hindu zamindars and Muslim nawabs, Bengali civilians and barristers, and Jewish traders, among others, bought houses or rented apartments from the European residents in this area. The case histories of a few houses and how they changed hands illustrate a certain pattern in the transformation of the topography of the road during this period.[11]

For instance, no. 26 Theatre Road, which in 1912 was inhabited by an Englishman called T.S. Colley, passed into the hands of Nawab Nasirul Mamalek Mirza Shujaat Ali Khan, the Consul for Persia, who set up his general office here in 1918. But it was rebuilt in 1926, and in 1931 it **(p.120)** was inhabited by a European family. Again, in 1912, the premises numbered 36 Theatre Road housed the offices of the Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Consulate General. In 1918, however, the family of the Nawab of Dacca (Dhaka in today's Bangladesh) moved into these premises, which were reported to have remained in their possession even in the 1930s.

The Black Upper Classes

This brings us to the choice of Theatre Road by the Indian feudal gentry for their habitation in Calcutta. We find several houses on the road (during these first three decades of the twentieth century) that were owned by members of this class. For instance, the houses numbered 14 and 15, named Hathwa House in 1912, were occupied by the Maharani Saheba of Hathwa (a princely state). When we move into the lanes behind Theatre Road, for that same year, we find no. 3 in Camac Street occupied by the Rajah of Khaira, and a few yards away the premises numbered 6 and 7 were possessed by the Rajah of Azimgunje. These rulers of princely states and the zamindars, though subordinate as native subjects, enjoyed certain privileges under British rule. In return for their loyalty (particularly during the 1857 sepoy rebellion), they were allowed access to parts of the White Town. Eager to rub shoulders with the colonial rulers, they moved into the White Town and bought or rented houses. An added advantage was that this part of Calcutta offered them better civic facilities than the Black Town.

The next class of Indians which moved into Theatre Road and its neighbourhood during the early decades of the twentieth century consisted of Bengali civilians (like K.C. Dey, Commissioner of Presidency Division, who resided in no. 4 Theatre Road, which is today renumbered no. 6 and houses Aurobindo Society) and professionals (like the barrister K.N. Majumdar who lived in no. 34 Theatre Road with two **(p.121)** other members of his family—one of whom was the

famous homeopath Dr Pratap Chandra Majumdar). Number 46 was owned in 1915 by Dr Rashbehari Ghosh (a professor and advocate of repute, whose name adorns the road that is the subject of our next chapter), but was bought in 1918 by Kumar Birendranath Roy Bahadur of Natore (a zamindary in East Bengal) in 1918.

There was also a sprinkling of north Indian Muslim families in the middle portion of the road; chief among them being Sir Abdel Karim Ghuznavi, MLC, who in 1931 was living in no. 30 Theatre Road. These people constituted the modern Anglicized upper crust of Indian society, which claimed access to this part of the White Town by dint of their own professional skills—either as civilians or lawyers and doctors, or businessmen (unlike the feudal Indian royalty and zamindar residents who gained access through their dynastic loyalty to the British). By the 1930s, some among them were sharing flats with English families in the same building. Thus, no. 7 Theatre Road at one time was found to be occupied by W.J. Traise, R.C. Sen, and Mrs Latif. Number 18 was inhabited by an Indian Rai Bahadur (an honorary title granted by the British government to Indians recognized for their services to the rulers) named P.C. Lal Chowdry along with an Englishman, C.S. Grosser.

But there were also other out of the ordinary residents. Curiously enough, in 1912, house number 2 in Elysium Row, known as ‘Bonnie Brae’, was occupied among others by a Bengali woman named Miss Mitter, who described herself as a house and land agent! On the main Theatre Road, the lobby of house no. 22 (inhabited by an Englishman named W.R. Craik, employed with Jardine, Skinner & Co.) was known as ‘Unceremonial Golightly Hall’, which continued to exist from 1918 till 1931. Who was the Miss Mitter of Elysium Row? What transpired in that intriguingly titled hall in Theatre Road? These are queries that await answers from a future generation of researchers who can throw further light on the history of this area.

(p.122) Theatre Road as an ‘Old Curiosity Shop’

Theatre Road, both past and present, is filled with such curiosities. Past European living habits persisted along with a newly introduced upper-class Indian lifestyle in an incongruous coexistence till the end of the 1940s. The street’s old European inhabitants and their descendants were a mixed lot—British administrators and barristers, as well as middle-class members of their society. We come across names like Hon. Sir H.E.A. Cotton; E.H. Keays, M.A. (Oxon) bar-at-law; and A.W. Shallow, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Southern Division), among other such important personalities living there during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

But at the same time, quite a number of Englishwomen were eking out a humble living by running boarding houses. In fact, the very first house on Theatre Road, on the right as one entered it from Chowringhee Road, no. 1, was called Bedford

House in 1912 and was a boarding lodge run by one Mrs M. Campbell. A one-storeyed building, it rose vertically during the next six years. In 1918, while the upper flat was occupied by Englishmen, the ground floor of the premises was taken over by the Consulate General of Chile, Ota Seizo. In 1926, it again changed hands, when it was rented by an English civilian, Sir Hugh Stephenson, a member of the governor's Executive Council. Today that site is occupied by a row of shops. Similarly, the premises on numbers 9 and 10 Theatre Road hosted boarding houses for several years—first run by Mrs T. McDonnell in 1918, then turned into a women's hostel called Girls' Friendly Society, Hostel and Club in 1926, and then again housed Mrs Molina's boarding house in 1931. The lanes behind were littered with similar boarding houses all through the early decades of the twentieth century—Mrs Walter's Boarding House in 48 Theatre Road in 1918, Mrs Blake's Boarding House on 25 Camac Street, which continued from 1918 till 1936, and the next premises (numbered 26 and 27) called Outram House, described as Mrs Kindler's Boarding House, **(p.123)** which survived till 1936. Mrs Blake also set up a boarding house in a building called Killarney Lodge at 2 Wood Street.

The proliferation of these boarding houses could be attributed to the growing needs of the large number of middle-class European and Anglo-Indian employees of mercantile offices and government departments that had sprung up in the neighbourhood during these early decades of the twentieth century (for example, Bathgate & Company's branch dispensary in Camac Street; the Survey of India office in Wood Street; Office of the Criminal Investigation Department [CID] and Armed Police in Elysium Row).

The boarding houses of Theatre Road also catered to the needs of another section—students. In the neighbouring Park Street, St Xaviers' College had come up for male students. In Middleton Row, across Theatre Road, the old garden house of Henry Vansittart (Governor of Bengal from 1760 to 1764) had been converted into Loretto House for girl students. It was not a coincidence that in 1926 Mrs T. McDonnell's boarding house was turned into a women's hostel. The sites of those boarding houses are occupied today by high-rise buildings which house commercial offices, banks and financial institutions, residential flats, and departmental stores, among other things.

The rise of the English-run boarding houses in Theatre Road in the White Town for subordinate employees corresponded to the parallel emergence of Bengali-run lodges (known as 'mess') in the Black Town during the same period. Such lodges, which sprung up in the lanes of Bagbazar, Harrison Road, Amherst Street, and neighbouring areas provided Bengali clerks and students coming from outside Calcutta with accommodation and meals at affordable rates.

A Narrative of Continuity

While most of these boarding houses and establishments have disappeared, some of the old structures still continue to survive and are **(p.124)** often found to be serving their original purposes. The Saturday Club, which was established in 1878 by English civilians and army men in Wood Street, is still there, now managed mainly by rich Indians belonging to the community.[12] Walking up a few yards along that street, one comes across the offices of the Survey of India that still stand on the old site where their presence was recorded as far back as 1918. Some buildings, in spite of changing hands, peculiarly continue to accommodate the old professions that they once housed in the past. Thus, in Wood Street, a house that was known as Miss Brown's Nursing Home in 1918 was turned into Calcutta Nursing Home by a Bengali called Captain S.C. Mitra in 1926, and is today occupied by a Bengali medical practitioner.

One such interesting instance of a colonial structure continuing to operate as a centre of postcolonial administration is the headquarters of the police intelligence bureau, which is still located at its old premises in Elysium Row (behind Theatre Road), now renamed Lord Sinha Road. (Lord Sinha was Satyendra Prasanna Sinha, a barrister who was appointed by the government as Advocate General in 1916, and later in 1920 as the Governor of Bihar–Orissa. He lived at 17 Elysium Row, which now houses the Sakhawat Memorial School.) During British administration, these premises were used as the offices of the CID, where Indian revolutionaries were detained and interrogated. Today, it carries on that same legacy by incarcerating radical Leftists like Naxalites, and grilling and torturing them.[13]

Traces of an old Muslim residential complex can be found today in the mid-section of Theatre Road, which in the past was inhabited by people like Nawab Nasirul Mamalek Mirza (in no. 26 in 1918), Jamal Jairaz, and Sidrek Jamall (in no. 27 in 1912), and C.A. Mohamed (in no. 30 in 1926). Over the years, these houses have been reassembled, reconstructed, and renumbered. But in this reconstituted site, we find today a huge complex numbered 33, carrying the nameplate of Shahjad Begum, and described as Wakf Estate, recalling old Muslim antecedents. **(p.125)**

Among Theatre Road's several other similar legacies of the past which still survive, two buildings stand out. One is no. 50, which is situated on the left side of the road as one enters it from Chowringhee Road. It has an interesting history. In 1912 it was inhabited by several English families (including one W. Metcalfe). In 1926 it was taken over by a Bengali medical officer, Major N.P. Sinha, IMS, who became a police surgeon and after retirement moved to Amherst Street in north Calcutta (a rather unusual example of a reverse movement from the White Town to the Black Town!). In 1931, the house was reconstructed as King's Court—a huge building with twenty-five suites inhabited

by European residents. Today, the old building stands in an utterly dilapidated condition with its walls crumbling down.

Unlike the sad history of no. 50, the other house on no. 23 Theatre Road still retains to some extent its old grandeur. It is one among the few old British-type bungalows that still survive on the road. A three-storeyed red house with a garden in front, it has a curious history. It is situated on a site which till the late nineteenth century was a sprawling area that hosted at least three huge slums—Naya Bustee with a population of 169; Choonoo-ka-bustee inhabited by about 400 people; and Hills Bazaar bustee with around 270 residents.[14] By the turn of the twentieth century, the bustees that interspersed the scattered dwellings of the English settlers in Theatre Road, Wood Street, Rawdon Street, Loudon Street, and other neighbouring areas had been demolished to make way for the construction of bungalows to accommodate the increasing influx of Europeans and rich Indians. Between 1912 and 1931, the bungalow and the surrounding grounds on 23 Theatre Road changed hands from English inhabitants to a group of continental residents. Later, the property was bought by a north Bengali zamindar family, whose descendants continue to occupy it today. While they reside in the original premises of the bungalow, a portion of the rear part of their property (that borders Wood Street) is now occupied by a high-rise block of shops of various types. **(p.126)**

The contrast between the fate of the two historical buildings—no. 50 and no. 23, the former collapsing and the latter still surviving—epitomizes in a certain sense the problematic of reconciling the past with the present in the race of urbanization. Why have certain types of buildings disappeared or become dilapidated and certain others have survived? Is it because of the disruption in the ownership of the former type in the course of urban development? Is the other type surviving due to the continuity of possession and better entrepreneurship by the owners (in the form of turning portions of such buildings into guest houses, or other profit-earning enterprises)? There is a need for further investigation into the history of these buildings in this area.

The Transition in Theatre Road

Post-Independence Theatre Road underwent a slow change with the old English residents and owners of commercial establishments, before departing, gradually selling off their houses and business concerns to Indians—mainly north Indian trading and industrial classes. Following this, in the next decades, Theatre Road developed into a cosmopolitan residential-cum-commercial area, inhabited by a few Bengali upper-class professionals and descendants of old occupants, but mainly by north Indian business classes which reconstructed the road and its neighbourhood. Barring a few ‘curiosities’ from the past, like some scattered old British type bungalows and buildings (like the Astor Hotel, or the police station at the crossing of Loudon Street) and parks built by the British (now renamed, for example, the Maharaja Pratap Udyan near the same crossing), the new

streetscape and architecture of present-day Theatre Road are marked by high-rise condominiums and shopping malls, beauty salons, and spas, which have come up on the site of the old Victorian bungalows and boarding houses, announcing the transition into the postcolonial era.

But these architectural changes in transition also reflect new forms of continuity from the colonial past. The commercial complexes and **(p.127)** entertainment centres that have come up recently both on the main Theatre Road and its neighbouring streets cater to a certain class of Calcutta citizens. Their customers are the privileged children of the neo-colonial global system—the top brass of industrial houses, highly paid employees in the multinational corporate and information technology sectors, entrepreneurs involved in international commerce, a new class of contractors thriving on the construction boom that is engulfing the outskirts of Calcutta, followed by professionals engaged in law, academic activities, and the film industry, among others. They have replaced the European residents of pre-Independence Theatre Road.

Yet, the street life of Theatre Road and its environs are dominated by a diverse assortment of occupations and their followers, who belong to the lower orders. Directly opposite the high-status Astor Hotel on the main road, or near the New Kenilworth Hotel in neighbouring Russell Street, one can find pavement food stalls offering spicy north Indian kebabs, Chinese noodles, south Indian masala dosas, and Bengali *luchi-alur dam* and other such steaming mouth-watering dishes—which can be had at one-tenth the price charged by the high-end hotels surrounding them. As one steps out from the multistoreyed shopping centre of Pantaloons in Camac Street, one finds the pavement and the lanes behind it occupied by rows of makeshift stalls selling a variety of goods ranging from snacks to fresh vegetables and fruits, and offering services like stitching shoes or mending electrical gadgets. But at night the pavements of the same Theatre Road and the streets that crisscross it are taken over by another class of citizens. They are the homeless labourers who sustain the city’s civic infrastructure, but have no roofs over their heads.

Scavengers employed by the municipality on daily wage rates to clean the roads, self-employed ragpickers who sell the collected waste to traders, who in their turn recycle them into profitable sources of income, domestic helps working in neighbouring houses, and vagabonds of all **(p.128)** sorts congregate at night on these pavements. In summer, they sleep in the open. But in winter and during the rains, they set up makeshift shelters—consisting of a few bamboo poles covered up with plastic sheets. On these pavements, at the end of the day’s labour, their womenfolk improvise temporary cooking stoves (by assembling a few bricks into a quadrangle-shaped stove of sorts and lighting up some twigs and straws into a fire), upon which they put their pots and pans).

The pavement (known as ‘footpath’ in official records) which originated in the neighbourhood of Theatre Road in 1858, was meant to be an exclusive domain for pedestrians, but has now been transformed into a site for trade in minor items during the day, and into residential quarters for wage labourers during the night. This subversion of the original colonial plan of building pavements (based on the London model) can be traced to the Indian tradition of sharing the same space between residential and trading interests. An informal system of administering this space in Theatre Road—allowing the coexistence of the professions of the rich inhabitants and the occupations of the street vendors—has evolved over the years through negotiations between these various groups which enjoy a high degree of collective autonomy. The street vendors who use the pavements to sell their goods during the day and the daily labourers who set up their nocturnal shelters on the same site have to pay a weekly illegal tax (called *hafta*) to the local policemen in order to gain access to those pavements.

As we walk down the tail end of Theatre Road, which reaches and crosses Lower Circular Road in the direction of Park Circus on the east, we enter a middle-class/lower middle-class habitat of Bengali and north Indian residents (mainly Muslims) who have been living there for ages.[15] The ground floors of these houses have been rented out to small shops and commercial establishments that cater to the daily needs of the residents (for example, the premises of numbers 62/63 now house a tailoring shop and a medical drug store; 89B advertises ‘ethnic clothes’ under the name of ‘Raheemens’, and some neon-lit shops sell furniture). The **(p.129)** pavements, as in the upper part of Theatre Road, are used by vendors to sell vegetables and knick-knacks, among other things.

Theatre Road reproduces to some extent the transition and permanence in the history of the erstwhile White Town, reflecting the transformation in the ethnic and social composition of its residents (from white to black), as well as the continuity in the coexistence of different classes within that space (businessmen, professionals, manual labourers, street vendors, and trading communities, among others). A vertical expansion has taken place through the rise of multistoreyed residential and commercial complexes from the base of the former cottages and bungalows of the White Town. Unlike the space in Bagbazar in the north (which remains stagnant within the mainly horizontal pool of one-, two-, or three-storeyed old houses and shops), this middle portion of the town had witnessed a large-scale construction boom, setting off a rise in both the value of land and rent of properties. This occurred in response to the housing needs of the growing influx of members of the modern metropolitan commercial sector (which Bagbazar did not face) into Theatre Road and its neighbourhood in Chowringhee (the population of this area now being around 1,60,000).

Vertical versus Horizontal Expansion

The vertical expansion of space in Theatre Road through high-rise architecture is, however, beset by certain problems. Lack of essential infrastructural facilities like regular supply of electricity to run the lifts in such buildings, availability of water from nearby sources to fight the possible outbreak of fire (like the one which swept through a six-storeyed building in neighbouring Park Street in 2010, killing forty-three and injuring hundreds),[16] and wide roads to allow the smooth movement of traffic limits the growth of this part of the city, among other constraints. **(p.130)**

Besides, the alluvial soil underneath the surface of the road is a deterrent to the construction of high-rise buildings. As early as 1914, a British official pointed out this danger. While recognizing that with the appreciation of land values ‘space is usually economized by increased height and weight in buildings’ (as in the commercial and administrative neighbourhood of Clive Street and Dalhousie Square), he warned, ‘It is not considered safe … to build houses … and offices which are unusually heavy.’ The reason he says was that ‘Calcutta stands upon a bed of stiff blue clay of varying thickness. Below the city lies a blue sand which is practically “quick.” Excepting where the blue clay is sufficiently thick, heavy structures cannot be erected with safety’. He stressed the need for introducing a system of ‘building high structures of lighter materials than those used at present’.[17]

The prospects of a further building boom in Theatre Road and its neighbourhood in the near future look uncertain. Erection of more storeyes above the existing ones entails risks described above. For the expansion of construction activities in the backward stretch of the road that tails off towards the east, land has to be acquired from the thousands of well-settled middle- and lower-class families who have been residing and successfully running small businesses in this area around Lower Circular Road and Park Circus. Most of them may not accept relocation to some uncertain place, even in return for financial compensation. If threatened with forcible eviction, they can mobilize public opinion and political forces in their favour. It is a different ball game altogether today—compared to the smooth-riding urbanization of the colonial period (when the entire village of Gobindapur could be dismantled, or working-class slums could be demolished to make way for modern roads) that could be accomplished without any apparent murmur of protests by the displaced.

Today’s Theatre Road is thus trapped within the constraints of a vertical architectural growth, as well as the limits of upward mobility **(p.131)** of its present residents. The residential quarters and the commercial establishments in the fashionable upper portion of the road (around Camac Street, Wood Street, Loudon Street, and so forth) do not afford enough physical and mental space for the rising aspirations of the new generation which lives and works there. The dilemma of this road, in a sense, typifies the spatial problem of Calcutta’s

further urban expansion. The city has to move beyond its traditionally laid out boundaries and look for space in a different direction.

Notes:

(1.) *Plan of the territory of Calcutta as marked out in the year 1742, exhibiting likewise the Military operations at Calcutta when attacked and taken by Serajud-Dowlah on the 18th of June, 1756*. Printed and published according to the Act of Parliament, by A. Upjohn, 2nd April, 1794 (London). The Marhatta Ditch was dug during the Maharashtrian campaign to capture Calcutta in 1742. The East India Company (which had by then taken possession of the three villages comprising Calcutta) began to dig an entrenchment around the town to prevent those soldiers from entering its territory. The entrenchment began from Bagbazar in the north and circled round towards the east. The original plan was to extend it further down towards the south-west up to the banks of the Hooghly. But as the Marhatta advance was halted soon, the southward extension of the ditch came to a stop. The entrenchment thus ended on the eastern border of the town. This portion was later filled up and turned into Circular Road (its upper portion now renamed Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road and the lower part Jagadish Chandra Bose Road). Today's Shakespeare Sarani (the erstwhile Theatre Road) runs from the borders of Chowringhee on the west and reaches its end at the present day Jagadish Chandra Bose Road opening of the old Circular Road on the east.

(2.) B.V. Roy, *Old Calcutta Cameos* (Calcutta: Asoka Library, 1949).

(3.) *Thacker's Calcutta Street Directory* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1918).

(4.) Kathleen Blechnyden, *Calcutta Past and Present* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1905).

(5.) *Calcutta Gazette*, 6 March 1788. See also Rev. W.K. Firminger, *Thacker's Guide to Calcutta* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1906).

(6.) W.K. Firminger, *Thacker's Guide to Calcutta*.

(7.) Known as 'Hindu Stuart', he was reported to follow the Hindu custom of walking up to the Hooghly River (from his residence in the White Town) every morning to take a bath in the waters of the 'holy Ganga'. His tomb, which can still be found in the Park Street cemetery, is decorated with sculptures of Hindu gods and goddesses—a design which he himself recommended for his future burial place before his death.

(8.) B.V. Roy, *Old Calcutta Cameos*.

(9.) H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of the Town of Calcutta Taken on the 6th April 1876* (C.S. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1876). See also footnote 14 of Chapter 2 on servants of British residents.

(10.) See footnote 19 of Chapter 1. Re: Salil Sarkar, *Theaterer Kolkata* (Mitra O Ghosh Publishers, 1999).

(11.) The history of the houses and their occupants narrated from now onwards is based on the annual records published as *Thacker's Calcutta Directory* from 1912 till 1930.

(12.) According to the information I gathered from descendants of old residents, the Club came to be known by that name because the European inhabitants of the White Town gathered there to await the weekly mail which arrived from England by ship every Saturday. The other reason could be the weekend holiday, which allowed them to congregate there for bonhomie.

(13.) The present author had a brief experience of such grilling during his detention as a political prisoner in one of the cells in those premises in 1975 at the time of the Emergency.

(14.) Appendix to *Report on the Census of the Town of Calcutta Taken on the 6th April, 1876*.

(15.) Theatre Road originally began from its crossing at Chowringhee Road in the west and ended at Lower Circular Road in the east. In 1935, the Calcutta Improvement Trust extended it beyond the Lower Circular Road crossing by reaching the seven-point crossing of Park Circus.

(16.) The devastating fire broke out on 22 March 2010, destroying portions of the 150-year-old building called Stephen Court in Park Street. It housed the famous confectionary shop Flury's, the music store Music World, and offices of several commercial establishments. Failure of the owners of the building to abide by fire safety norms and lack of prompt supply of water were said to have been among the causes for the devastation that led to loss of both human lives and property.

(17.) Major F.C. Hirst, *A Brief History of the Large Scale Surveys of Calcutta and Its Neighbourhood, 1903–1914* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1914).

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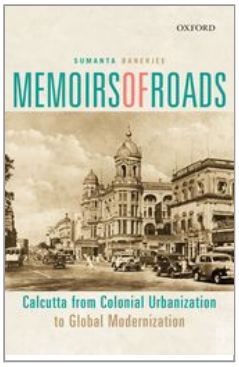

Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Modernization
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Rashbehari Avenue

The Bengali Middle-Class Homemaker

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Abstract and Keywords

Rashbehari Avenue, and the cluster of streets and lanes behind it, located in south Calcutta, emerged as a neighbourhood preferred by modern Bengali middle-class professionals from the early twentieth century, when some of the leading members of this class bought land and built houses there. Eager to get away from the conservative and claustrophobic environs of their old north Calcutta roots, this new generation of English-educated professionals like lawyers, college teachers, and medical practitioners, fashioned a culture of their own—a blend of both their past Bengali literary and musical traditions, and the newly acquired Western social values and behaviour pattern. By the mid-twentieth century, this part of the city expanded further south with the influx of refugees from the then East Pakistan following the 1947 Partition, which changed to a large extent the class character of the demographic composition of its residents.

Keywords: Bengali middle class professionals, Western education, Bengali literature, refugees, Rashbehari Avenue, refugees

Rashbehari Avenue cannot claim any hoary respectable ancestry like Bagbazar Street (an old trade route associated with the rich Seths and Basacks) or Theatre Road (newly built by clearing jungles by British colonial entrepreneurs). Although given the fashionable title ‘Avenue’, the road had its beginnings in a rather obnoxious conduit for the disposal of waste.

To go back to its history, in the early twentieth century, the municipal authorities sliced out a tract through the fields that stretched from the south-eastern extremity of Calcutta (where today stands the Ballygunge Railway Station) up to Kalighat towards the south-west. They dug an underground sewerage system beneath the surface of this tract, which used to carry the human waste that was collected all along the route through drains connected to the main sewer at several intersections, to be disposed of into the Hooghly River at the end of Kalighat.

The gradual development of these backwaters of the southern fringe of the city into the modern Rashbehari Avenue deserves a historical investigation into the origins of the changes in the demographic composition and socio-economic habits of its residents. As narrated earlier, by the early twentieth century, the south-eastern edge (from the end of Park Street to Gariahat and outlying areas) had become a part of **(p.135)** Calcutta city, with a considerable number of upper-class Bengali families building houses there.[2] Their presence attracted certain members of the middle classes, who began to buy plots and set up houses in the still unoccupied neighbourhood of Ballygunge further south, from where the sewerage started. Despite the rather noxious association with its nether regions, the area's overground facilities (like a newly laid tramway line, and the Ballygunge railway station on its south-eastern end) drew the forward-looking sections of the Bengali middle class—professionals like teachers and lawyers, employees in government departments, and small traders and businessmen among others—to this end of the town.

The Story Behind the Renaming of a Road

Meanwhile, the Calcutta Improvement Trust acquired land in this locality and reconstructed the surface over the old sewer into a 3,000-yard-long road that connected Gariahat with Russa Road in Kalighat. A little over 100 feet wide (under which the nine-feet-wide sewer continued to flow), the road was built at a cost of one crore rupees and came to be known as Main Sewer Road. It was on this road that houses were built by the Bengali upper-caste and Hindu middle-class settlers during the 1920s.

But they continued to smart under the humiliation of living on a road carrying the name of the gutter, reminding them perpetually of their uncomfortable association with the outcastes (the mehtars from the Dalit community who were employed to clear their wastes through the sewerage that ran under their houses, and yet who were rejected as a pollutant community under the Hindu hierarchical caste system).

After being pressed by these Bengali bhadralok residents for dropping the malodorous name of the road, the Calcutta Improvement Trust in early 1929 adopted a resolution stating 'Until the new Main **(p.136)** Road … from Gariahat Road to the junction with Lake Road which is generally referred to as Main

Sewer Road is taken over and named by the Corporation it will be described in all documents and correspondence of the Trust as Ballygunge Avenue.’[3] The Calcutta Corporation took over the road the same year. By then, the Bengali bhadralok residents had found representation in the Corporation by electing councilors to the municipal body. They forwarded a proposal requesting it to rename the road after one who belonged to their own class—Rashbehari Ghosh, a famous advocate in the Calcutta High Court, who was also well known for his philanthropy. It took two more years to finally change the name according to their wishes, when on 20 May 1931, the Calcutta Corporation accepted their proposal and renamed the road as Rashbehari Avenue[4] (see Map 5.1).

(p.137) The Early Years

During the early years of the twentieth century, Rashbehari Avenue remained scarcely inhabited, marked by vast stretches of wasteland and forests, and interspersed with a few markets and orchards owned by Bengali landlords. According to a 1915 street directory, lanes like Ekdalia Road, Uluberia Road (later renamed Fern Road), and Kankulia Road housed some families, a few among them Europeans. The plot numbered 1 in Ekdalia Road was owned by a certain C.W. Scott, while the other half a dozen houses on that road were mainly *bagan-bari*s or cottages with gardens, in possession of rich Bengalis like one Purna Chandra Dman (no. 7), who probably used them as weekend holiday resorts. Fern Road represented a mixed community—no. 2 was occupied by a European named J.W. Medland, no. 8 by a Muslim, Mushi Tamijuddin, and the other houses were owned by Hindu Bengalis of various castes ranging from Bhattacharyas to Pals. From out of all these lanes, Kankulia Road stands out as an interesting example of how Bengali landlords were expanding their influence in this area in the early years of the twentieth century. Out of the approximately thirty houses, the majority were owned by upper-caste Hindu families (for example, Bhattacharyas, Chattopadhyas, Roy Choudhuries), among whom Ashutosh Mukherjee was the most prominent. He was in possession of a vast stretch (numbered 1 to 6) consisting of slums, orchards, and rice fields. He also owned at least four more plots (numbers 7; 9–12; 14/1 and 14/2; and 32).[5]

Map 5.1 Rashbehari Avenue, 2016

Source: Courtesy of the author.

Kankulia Road was dotted with slums—a feature that continued to mark it well into the later decades. As in Bagbazar in the north and Theatre Road in the centre, these slums (or bustees) in the southern parts of the city also grew up in plots owned by upper-class residents, who let out portions of these plots to their menials (domestic helps, gardeners, carriage drivers, among others) as well as artisans like tailors and carpenters upon whom they had to depend. These labourers **(p.138)** and artisans built shacks which conglomerated into the huge bustee complex in Kankulia Road. The bustees thus became a major source of revenue for the new generation of Bengalis who bought land and settled down here.

Ekdalia Road was the other site of settlement and building activities by Bengali bhadralok families. It used to be an empty stretch running across the erstwhile Main Sewer Road, from its beginning from Ballygunge Station to Gariahat Road. Quite a number of Bengali middle-class families settled down here, as is evident from their establishment of a school as far back as 1914. Called Jagadbandhu Institution, it was founded by some local Bengali scholars—leading among them being Rajendranath Vidyabhushan and Muralidhar Banerjee, both teachers of Sanskrit College, and Priyanath Shastri, an expert in Persian studies (who was the son of Surendranath Tagore and grandson of Satyendranath Tagore)—who were among the earliest bhadralok settlers in these parts of south Calcutta. The land on which the school was set up was gifted by Jagadbandhu Ray, a rich businessman living in that locality.[6]

By 1926, about a dozen houses had come up on and around the yet-to-be-renamed Main Sewer Road. They were owned not only by Bengali–Hindu upper-caste families (like Satyacharan and Shashibhushan Adhikary, M.N. Basu, Gangoly brothers), but also by a few Muslims (such as Syed Ali, S.A. Ali, Khalil Erasi) and Europeans (for example, J.A. Kidd, E.W. Dias, Mrs M. Saunders). Middle-class households, and their inevitable appendage, slums, which provided these households with their menials, sprung up in Jamir Lane, Swinhoe Street, Fern Road, and other alleys behind the main road.

In the next five years, by 1931, the number of such houses in the vicinity grew six or seven-fold. Most of them were built by Bengali Hindu families (Mukherjees, Chatterjees, Duttas, Deys, Boses, and Sens among similar upper caste groups). Ekdalia Road (one of the earliest settlements to cut across the Main Sewer Road), for instance, **(p.139)** saw during this period the entry of a number of Bengali teachers and educationists, leading among whom were Dr Radhakumud Mukherjee and his brother Dr Radhakamal Mukherjee. These ancestral houses of the Mukherjees still stand on the old site. In 1931, they were numbered 6 and 6/1. Today, they bear the number 37 and onwards, spreading over a stretch of three-storeyed residential flats and shops occupying their ground floors. The 1931 list of premises on Ekdalia Road also shows the existence of a Corporation Free Primary School (numbered 6/1/1), which must

have catered to the needs of the children of the poor residents, domestic helps, and artisans who lived in the neighbourhood and met the service requirements of the middle-class population. These poor classes lived in shanties in Kankulia Road, which, as mentioned earlier, had been hosting slums since the early years of the twentieth century.

Guided by the 1931 street directory, as we cross Rashbehari Avenue from the Ekdalia Road–Fern Road–Kankulia Road cluster on the left (near Ballygunge Station) to further down on the right (towards Gariahat Road), we discover a changing demography. A knot of two streets behind the main road—Swinhoe Street and Mandeville Gardens—were mainly inhabited by Europeans with names like Jamison, Shape, Brooke, Widdup, Townsend, and Kennedy. They lived in small cottages with red tiled roofs and flower-decked gardens in the front, unlike the crowded tenements that were coming up in the Bengali quarter on the other side of Rashbehari Avenue. This patch looked like a slice from the White Town implanted in south Calcutta. The few Indians found to be living here appeared to follow occupations that served the needs of these European residents. Thus, we come across the name of a Motilal Chamari (a cobbler?) living at the junction of Swinhoe Street and Mandeville Gardens. In Swinhoe Street, in the midst of the European quarters there stood Hukum Chand Electric Steel Works—possibly helping out the residents with their domestic problems relating to electricity and welding. **(p.140)**

When we move further up, we reach Bright Street, which in the 1930s was inhabited by rich Bengali–Hindu families and north Indian Muslim businessmen. Of the Choudhury family (to which belonged the barrister-turned-littérateur Pramatha Choudhury, whose household in that road in the 1910 period had been earlier described in Chapter 2), K.N. Choudhury still owned a house (numbered 2/1). The other premises on Bright Street in the 1930s were occupied by a variety of Indian upper-class people, ranging from the Maharaj Bahadur of Nuddea (residing in the houses numbered 1 and 2) to businessmen like Wahid Ali & Sons (operating from the house no. 9A). These rows of residential houses were interspersed with grocery stores and pharmaceutical shops among other similar small establishments that met the needs of the local residents. A typical shop was the Popular Solar Hat Manufacturing Company that was situated in 18 Bright Street. It produced the round-shaped hat with a conical top (known as the ‘shola-topi’) that became the usual headgear for English civilians and policemen who used it to protect themselves from the heat of the sun in the tropical climate.[7]

Extension of Rashbehari Avenue

The other part of Rashbehari Avenue—stretching from the Gariahat crossing towards Kalighat in the south-west—underwent rapid urbanization during the 1930s. This was again due to pressures on the municipality from influential Bengali middle-class residents who had bought plots there. From the end of the

1920s, they began to grumble about the lack of civic facilities and demanded the development of streets and lanes that had cropped up in the area. Thus, we find one P. Banerjee, M.B., Lieutenant, AIRO, a resident of Gariahat Road, complaining in a letter in 1929: 'From the junction of Lake Road to the junction of Gariahat Road there are many streets and lanes off the Main Sewer Road [now Ballygunge Avenue], and practically none of them bears a name plate.'[8] Still more forthright was one M.N. Basu, living in P-92 **(p.141)** Lake Road, who objected to the municipality's indifference to the unhygienic conditions prevailing in his neighbourhood due to the existence of a Pail Depot (a dumping ground for refuse). Reminding the authorities that 'the Pail Depot in Lake Road would be removed in no time was the distinct understanding that induced people to purchase lands in the neighbourhood,' he then added, 'Apart from a thousand and one other inconveniences, the number of flies … has increased to such an extent that even at night we are disturbed by these in hundreds, if not in thousands.'[9]

In the meantime, facing the influx of bhadralok settlers and their growing problems, the Calcutta Improvement Trust drew up a special plan for this stretch of the old Main Sewer Road 'for the purpose of providing building sites, creating new and improving existing means of communication and facilities for traffic, and affording better facilities for conservancy … [and] to lay out new streets and alter existing streets in the area'.[10]

As a result, Rashbehari Avenue and the streets and lanes behind it fast developed into a zone which became inhabited predominantly by a new generation of Bengali middle-class people who found it comfortable for their lifestyle and tastes. A tramline running through the main road, leading up to the heart of the city, allowed them easy access to their workplaces in government offices and commercial firms (where they worked as petty officials, supervisors, or clerks). The Ballygunge Railway station also helped them to commute to the centre of the city. Further, the railway tracks that stretched from here to the southern rural neighbourhood accrued other benefits to the Bengali residents of Rashbehari Avenue. Agriculturists and fishermen from this rural hinterland (consisting of villages like Baruipur, Sonarpur, Canning) began to travel by train —a few hours' journey—to carry their freshly grown vegetables and fruits, and fish netted the same morning, in order to sell them to the bhadralok clientele at the two big markets (Gariahat and Lake) that had sprung up on Rashbehari Avenue. **(p.142)**

This development illustrates a feature of urbanization in Calcutta in the twentieth century that differs from the model of its Western counterpart. During the same period, the process of urbanization in the West was marked by a total disjuncture between the urban and the rural. But in this part of Calcutta, modernization in the shape of technological transport system and civic facilities

also opened up commercial avenues for the rural economy, thus providing a space for rural–urban coexistence.

The streets and lanes behind Rashbehari Avenue, with increasing construction activities, also began to ‘bear name plates’ (the absence of which disturbed a resident in 1929, whose letter has been quoted earlier). In the 1937 list of streets, we come across a long array of such lanes and alleys bearing names like Lake Road, Manoharpukur Road, Panditiya Road, Mahanirban Road, and Hindustan Park, among others, that still continue to survive. The residents of these localities comprised of both the traditional Bengali government employees (like Dr A.K. Adhikari, an assistant malariologist occupying 25 Hindustan Park), and new Bengali entrepreneurs (like R.B. Bose, proprietor of Hindustan Energy and Construction Company located in P-654 Rashbehari Avenue, and A.K. Roy, an engineer who set up Diana Engineering Company on 1-1 Fern Road).[11]

Along with the infrastructural facilities provided for residents and entrepreneurs in Rashbehari Avenue, there was also an environmental ambience that attracted them. This was provided by the Lake—behind the main Avenue—that flowed from the east in Gariahat towards Tollygunge in the west. The Lake (now known as Rabindra Sarobar) was created by the Calcutta Improvement Trust in the early 1920s, by digging up a marshy jungle in the village of Dhakuria. Besides offering soothing breeze in the hot summer months (a pleasure denied to the residents of the crowded parts of north Calcutta, or even the more privileged inhabitants of the Park Street–Theatre Road complex), the Lake also provided a space for relaxation and recreation for the **(p.143)** Bengali inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Their representatives in the Calcutta Municipality and other official bodies facilitated the development of the Lake as a promenade for their use. Parks were built and iron benches were constructed on its banks, where the residents congregated in the evenings to relax after their office hours. Soon, clubs came up in the area to meet the athletic needs of the younger generation of indigenous residents like the Anderson Club (for swimmers—now known as Indian Life Saving Society) and a number of rowing clubs (Lake Club, Bengal Rowing Club, and so on). A hanging bridge was constructed in 1926 over the Lake to convey tourists to a small island, where stood a mosque that predated the birth of the Lake. Among other ancient relics on the banks of the Lake are some cannons lying to its west, which were found during an excavation in the early 1920s. They are believed to have been owned by Siraj-ud-dowlah, the Nawab of Bengal, who fought a last-ditch battle against the English on the fields of Palashi (Plassey) in 1757—and lost it. A Buddhist temple also came up in the area, adding to the multi-religious ambience of south Calcutta.

By the 1940s, Rashbehari Avenue had developed into a full-fledged Bengali neo-middle-class locality (different from Bagbazar), where a community of government servants, teachers, lawyers, medical practitioners, and businessmen who shared common social habits and cultural tastes made their homes. Bengali

littérateurs gravitated towards the area attracted by its cultural ambience. The famous scholar Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee built a house in a street behind it. So did Nirmal Bhattacharya, another professor, in a street opposite it across the Rashbehari Avenue. Well-known poets like Buddhadev Bose and Ajit Dutta took up residence in flats in a housing complex situated on 202 Rashbehari Avenue. At one time, it became the cynosure of intellectuals from different parts of India and abroad.

The World War II years saw another change in the socio-cultural environs of Rashbehari Avenue. Barracks were set up in the Lake area **(p.144)** to accommodate British and American soldiers who were to be later transported from Calcutta to fight the Japanese on the Burma front. The residents were exposed to the new culture of these soldiers, who in their leisure hours moved around the streets, travelled by trams, and bought knick-knacks from markets. But instead of fraternization with the local people, most of them carried on the old predatory culture of colonial rulers—by bullying the citizens and luring indigenous women and turning them into prostitutes. Thanks to the early end of the War, Rashbehari Avenue was spared further degradation.[12]

The Multilinguistic Culture of South Calcutta

To come back to its history, Rashbehari Avenue was not merely a Bengali middle-class enclave. It threw open the space to members of the same class of socio-economic background from other parts of India. Prominent among those who migrated here were people from south India—Tamilians, Malayalis, and Kannadigas. They were sought after by government offices and commercial firms for their skills as accountants, among other qualifications. In the 1920s, these south Indian middle-class migrants found virgin territory for settling down in the still-sparsely occupied end of Rashbehari Avenue and its neighbourhood opposite the Russa Road junction. They rented houses from Bengali landlords and set up institutions for their own community. The South Indian School (now known as National High School) on Lansdowne Road was one such institution. Still later, in the 1950s, they set up an eating joint in ‘Komala Vilas’, near the juncture of Rashbehari Avenue and Deshapriya Park, which used to serve the best south Indian vegetarian dishes.

It is the neighbourhood of this part of south Calcutta that also housed one of the best historians of the city, P. Thankappan Nair, who had lived in the city for more than half a century. His collection of travelogues of European visitors to the city through three centuries and compilation **(p.145)** of documents relating to its roads still remains an essential source of information for anyone researching the history of Calcutta.

Returning to Social Sewerage

However, despite the change in the name and the concealment of the filthy sewerage beneath the road, the middle-class society of Rashbehari Avenue could

never be far away from the dirty underbelly that lay in the backyard of their own social being. Tucked away behind the lanes that wound away from the main road were hundreds of slums inhabited by the manual labourers on whom the Bengali bhadralok society depended for their daily needs—clearance of garbage in the streets, cooking in their kitchens, sweeping the floors of their homes, dusting their furniture, tailoring and washing their clothes, and sundry other such regular chores. These labourers were joined by a variety of other sections of the vast masses of the poor who congregated in the Rashbehari Avenue area, keeping pace with its urbanization. They constituted what in today's terms can be described as the 'informal sector'. A contemporary report throws light on the composition of the slum-dwellers in the late 1920s: 'The residents of the bustees are mainly divisible into seven classes—(1) labourers and artisans, (2) hawkers and itinerant vendors of food, (3) poorer bhadralok classes—consisting mainly of priests, brokers, pressmen, clerks and shop assistants, (4) menial servants, (5) small shopkeepers, (6) prostitutes, and (7) persons without any ostensible means of livelihood such as the criminal class, beggars.'[13]

The largest slum was situated in Kankulia Road, behind Rashbehari Avenue, which has been referred to earlier in this chapter. Describing the living conditions there, the secretary of the Health Association of the area wrote: 'It contains many insanitary tanks surrounded by bustees, the people of which use the contaminated water of these tanks for domestic purpose. There was an epidemic of cholera here in 1925.' In **(p.146)** nearby Manoharpukur 1st lane also, bustees were surrounded by 'dirty tanks and … dirty stagnant drains'.[14]

The ubiquitous slum thus continued to accompany the housing boom in Rashbehari Avenue—just as had happened in Bagbazar and Theatre Road in the nineteenth century. Despite efforts to gentrify the city by demolition of slums and pushing them to the outskirts, they resurfaced to rub shoulders with the houses of the middle-class members and the rich in Calcutta. This was unlike the process of urbanization in the modern cities of the West, where the spatial distribution of residents and their housing stock was marked by a strict division between the inner city occupied exclusively by the privileged classes and the outer fringes kept apart for the habitation of the labouring classes (who commuted to the inner city during fixed working hours, and were rendered invisible for the rest of the day by their exile in distant working-class quarters or squatter colonies). In Calcutta, however, the slum-dwellers existed almost cheek by jowl with the middle- and upper-class owners of the houses.

This close proximity of the rich and the poor was due to the paucity of space in the roads and neighbourhoods that had expanded in spurts in the process of Calcutta's urbanization—whether in Bagbazar (where the Bengali owners of slums originally relegated them to the Nikaripara bustee at the end of the road, but they re-emerged in the lanes behind the main road as they were needed by the growing number of residents), or Theatre Road (where the English settlers

invested their capital in slums, and, therefore, had to live with them), or Rashbehari Avenue (where the neo-middle-class Bengalis, despite their search for gentrification, could not exile the slum-dwellers from their habitat because of their dependence on them). In Western capitals, the transport system allowed labourers to commute from their quarters in the outskirts to the inner city. In Calcutta, in the absence of such fast transport, the slum-dwellers, who manually served the civic needs, had to be accommodated within the neighborhoods.[15] **(p. 147)**

The dilemma was exemplified by the civic authorities' problem of relocating the *dhobi*s, the traditional washermen, in the environs of Calcutta. They used to collect clothes from the middle-class homes, soak them in soap, clean them in a pond, and then rinse them by beating them on a piece of wooden/concrete platform projected angularly on the edge of the pond. From the late nineteenth century, the authorities tried to relocate these dhobis to areas that would be distant from the main city. They erected two 'Dhobikhanas'—one for the north, and the other for the south. The latter was built in a sparsely inhabited spot south of Circular Road in 1891, with some '100 stones' (slabs for beating the clothes). But due to the inevitable speed of urbanization, this area soon became a part of the city with the demolition of the old slums, which were replaced by new residential middle-class houses. Property owners in the neighbourhood began to press for the removal of the 'Dhobikhana'. But it was difficult to find a suitable alternative site owing to the increasing pace of urbanization at the time in that part of the town. It was only at the turn of the twentieth century that the Corporation could find a 'large area of surplus lands … without means of access' in the still-undeveloped south Calcutta, to the east of Lansdowne Road, where it acquired 'about 10 bighas … for the new dhobikhana'.[16]

But as Lansdowne Road developed, the dhobikhana had to be removed again to some other less-developed site. We thus find that in the late 1970s, the dhobis had been relocated to the eastern part of the city 'in areas extending roughly from Beliaghata in the north to Kasba (beyond Ballygunge station) in the south'.[17]

From Homes to Shopping Malls

The evolution of Rashbehari Avenue all through the decades of the twentieth century epitomizes the growth and development of a new generation of contemporary Bengali middle-class settlers who, like prudent homemakers, built up in south Calcutta a family of like-minded **(p.148)** male bhadraloks and female *bhadramahila*s (ladies), sharing common living styles and cultural tastes. This generation, at that time, wanted to escape from the environs of Bagbazar Street and its neighbourhood in north Calcutta, which stifled their newly born social and cultural desires. This is eloquently expressed by a European citizen of Calcutta in the 1920s: 'South Calcutta was being built on because this million of people, living in intolerable conditions [in north Calcutta] were beginning to

demand the rights of ordinary men to live in a place where at least they could breathe.’[18]

Today, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, Rashbehari Avenue is changing. With a population of around 2,00,000, it can boast of an almost equal male-female ratio, and 70–90 per cent literacy rate. But, the descendants of its old inhabitants are struggling between the desire to retain their past peaceful, middle-class socio-cultural and intellectual lifestyle on the one hand, and the urge to join the present over-riding, but anxiety-ridden rat race for crass commercial affluence that is sweeping over them on the other. The marginalization of the former desire is evident from the inability of the old middle-class families to maintain their houses (spread over several square yards) and their compulsion to sell them off to realtors in exchange for flats (confined to a few square feet space) in the multistoreyed housing estates that are coming up on either side of Rashbehari Avenue. The horizontal spread of housing has been replaced by a vertical climb.

Apart from the replacement of old houses by new multistoreyed residential complexes, some of the past housing spots have given way to financial and commercial interests like banks, shopping malls, and restaurants. When entering Rashbehari Avenue from the Kalighat Metro Station crossing on the left, we find an Axis Bank branch and several shopping complexes further south—a stretch which till the 1960s was occupied by residential buildings, the most important being premises no. 57, which were the ancestral house and studio of Sunil Janah, the famous photographer. Further down, as we reach the Gariahat crossing, we **(p.149)** enter a multi-class, multicultural shopping area—with high-end malls, restaurants, and bars, which stand on erstwhile residential spots, but coexist with the pavement stalls that sell garments, electronic gadgets, utensils, footwear, fashion accessories, and food items, among other goods that attract middle-class consumers from all parts of Calcutta. Similarly, when we reach the end of Rashbehari Avenue, at the crossing of Jamir Lane near Ballygunge Station, we find that the old residential houses have been replaced by a shopping complex called the Gariahat Mall. But a few yards down the lane, as we turn right and re-enter Rashbehari Avenue near the Ballygunge Railway Station, we find the pavements occupied by the traditional vendors from the nearby villages of Baruipur, Sonarpur, and Joynagar, who commute by the railway to come and sell their vegetables.

Changing Language of Architecture

The architectural language of modern Rashbehari Avenue conveys an impression of both change and continuity. The tall, neon-lit shopping malls (selling commodities that are displayed from behind glass facades) speak an idiom that is different from that of the old-style open-air groceries, sweetmeat stores, and shops selling garments or shoes (which still operate from the pavements of Rashbehari Avenue and lanes and by-lanes behind it). The modern retailing

methods of these malls address the top-most hierarchy of needs, where the rich consumers who have already fulfilled their basic requirements for food, clothing, and shelter now look for non-essential services and goods that are desirable because of their status symbol, and which can help them identify themselves with the upper strata. The global dialect of the billboards that have come up on the main road, advertising the expensive and specialized services offered by private nursing homes and medical clinics, has replaced the vernacular language of the one-time local general practitioners and their assistants (called ‘compounders’ in Bengali parlance, **(p.150)** who used to prepare medicines). But the chemists and druggists shops (known in popular Bengali as ‘dispensaries’) are still to be found scattered in the neighbourhood—again suggesting the coexistence of the global and the local.

However, more than through commercial shops, it is through residential housing that the language of architecture expresses the socio-economic differences and changes in the lifestyle of the inhabitants. We can still find in Rashbehari Avenue old three-storeyed houses built by the early residents, with open terraces on the top floor and covered verandas on the first floor, under which rows of shops occupy the ground floor. The verandas express the various nuances of Bengali middle-class living habits. They can be discerned by the types of garments that are hung for drying on the railings of the verandas. If they are women’s underwear (called *shaya*s and *shemij*s in Bengali), blouses, *sari*s, or men’s clothing like *dhoti*s, *lungi*s, *kurta*s, and *gamchha*s (home-spun towels), the residents can be identified as belonging to the traditional Bengali middle class. The more modern generation of residents of these houses would not display their washing in the public gaze on the railings of the veranda. They prefer to tie a rope from one end to the other behind the railings of the veranda, on which they hang their garments, which in types and sizes differ from the traditional. The new items are jeans, tee shirts, maxis, shorts, nighties, brassieres, and so forth, of different shapes and colours.

Newer residential complexes have come up on Southern Avenue facing the Lake, which runs parallel to Rashbehari Avenue. Their architecture speaks a different language. Inhabited by an upper class of bureaucrats, journalists, businessmen, and artistes from the entertainment industry, among others (mainly Bengalis, but also from different parts of India), the architectural style of these apartments displays a certain degree of affluence in public and shelter a private space at the same time. The open verandas of the past have been replaced by tiny balconies protected by iron grills. They are no longer needed for **(p.151)** drying clothes, since washing machines have ousted the washermen who in the past used to serve the residents. These balconies jutting out from the storeyes of the high-rise housing complexes are either used for displaying pots of flowers, or evening get-togethers. The ground floors are not let out to commercial shops as

in the old parts of the neighbourhood, but are used as covered space for parking the cars of the residents.

Yet, these residents of the new housing complexes, while patronizing the modern shopping malls, also drive down to the nearby Gariahat Market to buy their daily quota of fresh vegetables, fish, spices, and a variety of Bengali cooking items that may not be available in the malls. The act of shopping in the traditional marketplace, where the language of food brings together the various sections of the community, thus acts as a social link.

The housing style and shopping pattern in today's Rashbehari Avenue, therefore, constitutes an interesting zone of encounter between the past and the present, the middle and the upper classes, the poor and the rich in the socio-economic and cultural milieu of Calcutta despite constant tensions and conflicts. On the one hand, the road and its neighbourhood carry faint echoes of the sounds and smells of the Black Town of Bagbazar (in Rashbehari Avenue's old houses and markets) and recall associations with the White Town of Theatre Road (in some of its still surviving colonial red-brick mansions). On the other hand, the upcoming residential complexes and shopping malls represent the Bengali neo-elite's aspiration to become a part of the global megalopolitan economy. But although they are beneficiaries of that economy, the severely stressed civic infrastructure, the pressure of population, the inescapable existence of poverty, the rapidly deteriorating environment, and the foreboding of growing social and cultural alienation that may soon rupture the social linkage that we talked about earlier prevent them from transforming Rashbehari Avenue into a boulevard of a global megacity.

Notes:

(2.) See the sections on the growth and rise of the South Town in Chapter 2.

(3.) *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, 2 March 1929. Giving this information, the Gazette added: 'This decision of the Calcutta Improvement Trust will be welcomed by all those who have complained of the inelegant name the new road carried so long.'

(4.) Ajit Kumar Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath: Samajey O Sanskrititey* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd, 2008).

(5.) *Kolikata Street Directory—1915*.

(6.) The foundation stone of the school was laid at the crossing of Rashbehari Avenue, Ekdalia Road, and Cornfield Road on 11 January 1914 by Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee, vice chancellor of Calcutta University. In the early 1930s, the school moved to 25 Fern Road, where it still stands. Information about Jagadbandhu

Institution and its founders was gathered from Samik Bandyopadhyay and Dilip Sinha, well-known academics who were both alumni of the school. The career of Jagadbandhu Roy, as reconstructed from Bandyopadhyay's findings, appeared to have moved through a typical rags-to-riches trajectory. Son of a poor Bengali Brahmin family of Orissa, he arrived in Calcutta as an eleven-year-old lad sometime in the late nineteenth century, and was employed as a kitchen help in the house of Gangaprasad Mookerjee, father of Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee. The Mookerjee family sent him to school and he later joined the postal service as a junior post master. He then drifted into business by becoming a timber merchant, transporting wood from the nearby jungles of Sunderbans to a timber mill. The railways (with the Ballygunge Station situated close by) helped him to convey his goods, and he soon became rich enough to buy land in the vicinity. He built a house in Kankulia Road (known as 'Ray Bari'), and offered one of his plots in the neighbourhood for the establishment of the school.

(7.) The history of the houses situated on Main Sewer Road (later renamed successively as Ballygunge Avenue and Rashbehari Avenue) has been collated from *Thacker's Calcutta Directories* covering the first three decades of the twentieth century.

(8.) *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, 6 April 1929.

(9.) *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. From the proceedings of the meeting of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, held on Saturday, 16 February 1929.

(10.) The rise of small-scale Bengali entrepreneurs in the field of engineering and house construction is an interesting feature of Calcutta's economy in the 1920–30 period. Their advertisements in newspapers indicate the growth of a market for their goods among a new Bengali middle-class clientele. Thus a firm called Dutt & Company offered 'galvanized baths, buckets, stoves, lanterns, enamels'. Yet another, named P.C. Coomar & Co., Architects, Builders and Contractors, claimed to be 'specialists in drainage and water works'. Members of this new middle class also owned houses in Calcutta, which they were willing to rent out for anything between 50 rupees and 250 rupees per month. In their advertisement, they added: 'If anyone is in need of a house at any time should apply to us.' Bengal Belting Works Limited inserted an advertisement offering to sell 'belting and hose pipe as good as the best of the imported kind made under expert Indian management by Indian capital and labour and at much cheaper rates'. B.N. Chatterjee and Sons specialized in manufacturing 'collapsible gates, grilles, railings' (Re: *Calcutta Municipal Gazette* of 1929). It is quite obvious that these Bengali entrepreneurs (investing primarily in construction-related businesses) were addressing the needs of the members of the new generation of Bengali middle class who were building houses in Rashbehari Avenue and other areas.

(11.) *Thacker's Calcutta Directory*, 1937.

(12.) The sense of fear and hatred that gripped the Bengali mind at the sight of these foreign soldiers (both white and black) in Calcutta was captured by contemporary Bengali writers in their literature about the War years. But there were exceptions among the British soldiers who were billeted in Indian cities, the most important among them being Clive Branson, who in his letters (later to be published as *British Soldier in India: The Letters of Clive Branson* [London: 1944], after his death on the Burma front) empathized with Indians by describing in vivid terms the living conditions of slum-dwellers and the victims of the 1943 Bengal famine.

(13.) Letter in *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, 12 March 1927.

(14.) Letter by Muralidhar Banerjee in *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, 4 December 1926.

(15.) The old bustees survived in Bagbazar and Rashbehari Avenue also because of a strong movement by slum-dwellers, led by the Communist Party of India and other Leftist parties against eviction in the 1950s. Re: *Basti Movement in Calcutta: Housing Struggle of Basti Dwellers in the 1950s in Calcutta* (Calcutta: Unnayan, 1992).

(16.) *Departmental Report by the Deputy Chairman of Bustee Department*, from the *Report of the Municipal Administration (1908–09)*, Calcutta.

(17.) *A Study Report on Washermen in East Calcutta* (Economic and Social Support Programme Cell, Department of Planning, CMDA, June 1977).

(18.) Mr A. de Bois Shrosbree's speech at the Rotary Club on 2 April 1929, reported in *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, 6 April 1929.

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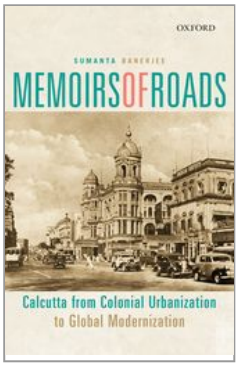

Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Modernization
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Conclusion

Towards a Future Megalopolis?[1]

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Abstract and Keywords

The final chapter looks at the changing role of the road, and the new shape that it assumes (in the form of flyovers, expressways, etc.) in the current project of urbanization in Kolkata. In the era of globalization, a new model of urbanization to meet the requirements of the various corporate sectors and their employees is being implemented in the city's north-eastern outskirts of Rajarhat (renamed as New Town), by acquiring land for setting up their offices, condominiums, and shopping malls. They are connected with each other, as well as with the core centre of Kolkata, by looming flyovers that are monopolized by fast-moving traffic, which deter common citizens from venturing into these roads. These new-fangled flyovers look down contemptuously upon the old humble roads that still survive and wind underneath them. The democratic space offered by the old roads and their road-side tea-shops and other facilities for the pedestrians, finds no place in the new topography of the flyovers.

Keywords: Megalopolis, Rajarhat, New Town, globalization, flyovers, democratic space

As evident from the preceding narrative, the three roads discussed so far have reached a cul-de-sac in urban development. Even Theatre Road, which with its modern commercial and residential complexes has become a part of megalopolitan urbanization, is bursting at its seams, as the establishments situated on it are starving for space for expansion.

But these existing roads cannot be restructured to suit the rising demands of urban economy and culture under a globalized neo-liberal order. The redistribution of the available space for such a reconstruction requires massive displacement of not only the poor slum-dwellers, but also vast sections of middle- and upper-class people who occupy houses and shops in Bagbazar Street, Theatre Road, and Rashbehari Avenue. The force by which the British colonial rulers cleared villages and ousted slum-dwellers to create those roads in Calcutta in the nineteenth- to early twentieth-century period cannot be used today in these urban neighbourhoods where well-entrenched households have built up connections at various levels with vested political powers, to be able to resist such forcible incursions. Negotiations to persuade them to give up their land are mired in years-long bargaining over financial compensation and their relocation to other areas. **(p.156)**

The town planners of Calcutta in today's neo-liberal era may envy the ease with which Baron Haussmann reorganized Paris in mid-nineteenth century by demolishing slums and changing the arrangement of streets and buildings. But just as Haussmann's 'strategic beautification' of Paris was subverted by the rise of barricades and workers' occupation of its streets during the Paris Commune, similar experiments to change the topographical surface by destroying the prevalent socio-cultural milieu of the Calcutta roads can be sabotaged by their inhabitants. As in the past, like a phoenix from the ashes, slums can rise from the debris of demolition. Roads can become sites of pitched battles between residents and the police.

Beyond Calcutta

Aware of these eventualities, the town planners are moving outside the borders of Calcutta to create a safe and walled megacity to feed the economic and social appetite of the new generation of beneficiaries of the neo-liberal economic order. In fact, the move started from the 1960s. During that decade, the administration took over the Salt Waters Lake on the north-eastern edge of Calcutta to develop it into a new township, so that the pressure on the inner city could be reduced. This Lake (or Salt Lake, as it is popularly known) originally consisted of marshland. The site on which Calcutta was built sloped down eastwards towards this marshland. In the nineteenth century, the British colonial administrators used this to dump the city's garbage, turning it into a natural drainage retention spill basin.[2] Over the years, the population of the villages around the marshland exploited this dump of refuse in innovative ways. First, when after a certain period, the top level of the garbage heap became suitable for cultivation, villagers began to grow vegetables there and export them to the Calcutta markets. They also raised pigs and other livestock on the dumps, the use and sale of which yielded income. Second, the marshland people displayed their **(p. 157)** skill and ingenuity by using the sewerage canals that were dug by the municipal authorities in order to drain out the liquid waste into the Salt Lake dump. They channelized the water from these canals into shallow banked-up-

tanks (called *bheri*s) which they dug to breed excellent species of fish, which they again exported to the Bengali fish-lovers in Calcutta. Third—and this was the latest innovation—the solid waste was collected by ragpickers, who removed all forms of non-organic material for resale, like metal objects, bottles, foil, rubber, cork, paper, cloth, and so forth.

This traditional balance between an ecological system and sustainable livelihoods was first threatened by the new model of urban expansion in the 1960s. A part of Salt Lake was acquired by the authorities to set up a township called Bidhan Nagar (named after Bidhan Chandra Ray, the then chief minister of West Bengal who laid its foundation). The professed objective was to provide accommodation for middle and lower-income-group citizens at reasonable cost. But, to start with, the townships swallowed up a large part of the wetlands by filling up the bheris which bred fish, and there was consequential loss of occupations of the local fishermen. The new land mass that was thus created at their cost provided space for the construction of residential houses, commercial complexes, offices of business establishments, hotels and restaurants, and entertainment centres, among other things.

Second, behind the official claims about provision of housing for the middle and lower classes, these building projects gave birth to a boom of real estate speculation. Property dealers and house agents, through various subterfuges (like leaseholds, fictitious transfer of possession, and so on) manipulated many among the original middle-class owners of plots or houses to sell them off to rich outsiders. As a result, contrary to the original aim of building middle-class residential complexes, certain segments of Bidhan Nagar have been turned into exclusive zones to house commercial establishments. Sector V of Bidhan Nagar, for instance, hosts offices of business concerns dealing in information, **(p.158)** processing and publishing, housing estates of police and paramilitary forces, entertainment parks and places, and headquarters of Indian and multinational commercial firms. In its desire to woo big business, the government has turned a blind eye to the violation of the rules that it itself framed for allocation of plots in Salt Lake (meant exclusively for residential purposes, that too for the middle and lower income groups). The acquisition of the site of Bidhan Nagar for a public purpose and its gradual transformation into a zone of commercial activities are a perfect illustration of the state’s predilection towards expanding the private coffers of capitalists with public funds.[3]

Towards the New Town in Rajarhat

It is in continuation of this profit-making, privatized model of urbanization (euphemistically described as public–private partnership or PPP) that a new high-tech township is coming up further north-east from Bidhan Nagar, in a place called Rajarhat (spreading over more than 3,000 hectares of land).

Unlike Bidhan Nagar (which covered some 1,250 hectares and was built in the 1960s and 1970s when real estate speculation was still in its infancy and the cabal of bureaucrats, builders, and house agents had just started operating), this township called New Town has been planned under a change of guard in the post-1990 era of liberalization, when according to the National Housing Policy of 1998, the state is to acquire land and develop the infrastructure and private players are to construct residential and commercial apartments.

The building of New Town has thus been shaped by a multipronged collaboration between local politicians and land sharks (who have played a major role in the initial acquisition of land through coercion, threats, and eviction), bureaucrats, realtors and contractors (who have shared the profits in the course of sale and distribution of plots to the private players), and the international and Indian corporate sector (which had **(p.159)** bankrolled its incorporation into a global megalopolitan system with the hope that it would allow the flow of goods and services, and further investments, from this sector).

Following the model of Bidhan Nagar, the planners of New Town also began by capturing the wetlands and arable lands of Rajarhat, on which the villagers depended for their livelihood through fish and vegetable cultivation on the wastes. They bought off these lands from the villagers at throwaway prices (promising them rehabilitation and jobs), sometimes coercing them and even forcibly evicting them to get possession of the lands. In the process, they destroyed 15,00,000 trees and plants and dispossessed 1,31,000 people of their livelihoods. They then sold these plots to land dealers and promoters at exorbitant rates, who filled up the wastelands and constructed high-rise buildings. Today, the old landscape of wetlands has been replaced by multistoreyed glass buildings and shopping malls, new banks with ATM facilities, and even a luxury resort called the Vedic Village.[4]

Disappearance of Roads as Public Space

In the planning of megalopolises like New Town in Rajarhat, roads lose their traditional role as a public space for citizens. Social activities like walking by pedestrians who may buy goods from pavement shops and vendors, or who might drop into a wayside restaurant, or visit a cinema house, are curbed by the very design of the megalopolis. The inhabitants of the residential complexes and the employees of the commercial establishments of New Town do not need to walk. The flyovers that leap over their habitations facilitate the traffic of their private vehicles, whenever they need to move out from their enclosed cocoons to visit entertainment centres. The urban commons on either side of these flyovers (which in other parts of Calcutta are shared by the public, like the Lake in Rashbehari Avenue, parks in Theatre Road, tanks in College Square and Azad Hind Bag, and playing grounds in Bagbazar in **(p.160)** north Calcutta) have been taken over by the authorities in New Town to segregate and split them into golf courses, swimming pools, hotel chains, and shopping malls that are

exclusively built and reserved for these residents. Apart from edging out foot travellers and wayside shops from their territory, these flyovers—thanks to the fast-moving traffic—have also debarred political actions by citizens like mass demonstrations to protest against injustice.

The construction of the road system in New Town stands in sharp contrast with that which we had earlier discussed while describing the history of Bagbazar Street, Theatre Road, and Rashbehari Avenue—the three roads that, despite changes, still continue to carry traces of a socio-cultural urban living style, moulded by precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial traditions. As a group of modern investigators puts it: 'Rajarhat beyond Kolkata disrupts the earlier pattern of the mutually constitutive relationship between space of accumulation of capital and the urbanity of democratic citizenship.'[5]

Megalopolitan Planning

The process of urbanization in Rajarhat highlights some crucial dimensions of megalopolitan planning: (*a*) territorial—involving appropriation of advantageous locations by the dominating upper classes; (*b*) protective—towards these classes through the construction of gated housing complexes and flyovers for their use; (*c*) administrative—policy decisions leading to the exclusion and marginalization of the subordinate groups from access to the space occupied by the upper strata; and (*d*) socio-economic—ending up with widening the gap further between the rich and the poor. In all these four respects again, the planning of New Town harks back to the early days of colonial policy of spatial division of Calcutta according to the needs of the then dominant power. Like the White Town of the past, New Town of today reproduces the same pattern of institutionalizing (through spatial policies) **(p.161)** the territorial monopoly of the dominant interests, denial of rights to the subordinate groups in the making of such policies, and the systematic deprivation of these underprivileged groups. It is a neo-colonial reproduction of the past model of urbanization by an indigenous ruling elite.

But this reproduction is taking place in the era of globalized neo-liberal economy. As a result, while following certain modes of the past colonial model of urbanization (like expropriation of land and its spatial division along class lines), the present planners are constructing Rajarhat also according to priorities that stem specifically from the current global economy of neo-liberalism. Under this order, market-driven economic growth (in terms of target-oriented production of commodities) prevails over humanitarian-driven social welfare (in terms of delivery of essential goods and services to the common citizens). This priority requires the creation of particular urban assets and infrastructure that can attract investments from national and multinational corporate houses. The New Town of Rajarhat has to compete with similar metropolises-turned-megacities in other parts of India, like Gurgaon in north India (or even abroad, like Shanghai in China), in the mad race to woo investors. As a result, its planning is marked

by the leaping highways that facilitate traffic for these prospective investors and their employees, and new-fangled huge architectural structures that house these employees and provide them with exclusive shopping and entertainment facilities. In this plan, there is no place for socio-economic amenities for the common citizens, particularly the labouring classes.

From Colonial Urbanization to Neo-Liberal Urbanization

When comparing the social dimensions of this type of megalopolitan urban planning in the present era of globalized neo-liberalism with **(p.162)** those of colonial metropolitan urban planning in Calcutta in the era of imperialism, we are struck by a few differences. As we have pointed out earlier, the colonial administrators set up certain institutions as basic infrastructures of urban society (like municipalities, schools and colleges, medical hospitals, and so forth) that were primarily intended to serve their class interests, but which indirectly contributed in a large measure to the socio-cultural welfare of the colonized citizens. Their benefits trickled down to the less privileged who could gain access to state-run hospitals and educational institutions.

This wider dimension of social welfare is entirely missing from the plan of urbanization of the present proponents of neo-liberal growth. We note two major features in this plan. First, generated by a coalition of forces made up of official town planners, property developers, financiers, and high-tech architects whose interests are tuned exclusively to the needs of investors from the corporate sector, it has no place for the manual labouring component of traditional urban society, which is being rendered redundant by technology—cooks are being replaced with microwave ovens, washermen by washing machines. Second, in this neo-liberal plan of urbanization, basic amenities like education and health care, among other things, are made available only to the upper crust of the privileged minority, which can afford to buy them from privately run institutes and expensive nursing homes.

This marks a departure from the Keynesian model of social welfare that was, to some extent, followed by the English rulers in twentieth-century Calcutta's civic administration.[6] The transition from this model to the neo-liberal one can be described in David Harvey's terms as that from 'managerialism to entrepreneurialism'. To quote him: 'The new urban entrepreneurialism typically rests … on a public–private partnership focusing on investment and economic development with the speculative construction of place rather than amelioration of conditions within a particular territory as its immediate (though by no means exclusive) political and economic goal.'[7]

(p.163) What Are the Future Alternatives?

When comparing and analysing the implications of the two patterns of urbanization of Calcutta—the first following the colonial mode of metropolitan planning, as represented in the history of the three arterial roads described

above, and the second emulating the current neo-liberal model of creating gated megalopolises, as evident in New Town—we recognize the obsolescence of the former and the socio-economic lopsidedness of the latter. Dissatisfied with both, we face the challenge of innovating a third alternative model of urban planning that could be based on a democratic consensus on the provision of basic civic amenities to all citizens, equitable sharing of space, and ecological balance between the local natural resources and new architectural construction. It needs to be more collaborative in character, involving the participation of all inhabitants, collectively addressing their common problems and designing the urban space.

Notes:

(1.) See note 59 at the end of Chapter 2 for different definitions of the term ‘megalopolis’.

(2.) The garbage used to be transported from the inner city to Salt Lake through a railway track that passed through the residential area of the eastern arterial road known as Circular Road. (See the section entitled ‘Birth of the Footpath and Railroad’ in Chapter 4 of this book.) But increasing protests from the residents, as well as criticism by the Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal, Dr D.B. Smith (who denounced the use of the railways for the disposal of garbage as ‘a great sanitary abuse’), compelled the municipal authorities to gradually give up the railway carriages and replace them with covered motor lorries to transport the city’s waste. See Ajit Kumar Basu, *Kolikatar Rajpath: Samajey O Sanskrititey* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd, 2008), p. 81.

(3.) For a fuller documentary account of the distortion of the original planning objectives of the Bidhan Nagar township, see Mohit Ray, *Paribesh O Nagarayan: Purba Kolkata Theke Rajarhat* (Calcutta: 2006).

(4.) The cost that the villagers of Rajarhat had to pay to make way for this megacity of New Town, and the profits reaped by its developers in the course of its transformation into a commercial-cum-residential complex for the corporate sector have been meticulously documented by a group of investigators of the Calcutta Research Group in their recently published book entitled *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination*, by Ishita Dey, Ranabir Samaddar, and Suhit Sen (also mentioned in note 60 of Chapter 2 of this volume). A similar picture of the demolition of sixty-year-old colonies of East Bengali refugees in south Calcutta to build condominiums has been depicted in a recent Bengali film directed by Mainak Biswas, called *Sthaniyo Sangbad*.

(5.) Dey, Samaddar, and Sen, *Beyond Kolkata*.

(6.) Cf. ‘In the Keynesian city, assets were considered to be *in situ* resources to be supported by public investment in welfare and infrastructure. In the neoliberal city the assets of the city must compete for economic investments at a national and international scale.’ (Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, ‘Introduction: Reading Urban Interventions’, in *The Blackwell City Reader* [USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002], p. 451.)

(7.) David Harvey, *From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism*, reprinted in *The Blackwell City Reader*, p. 81.

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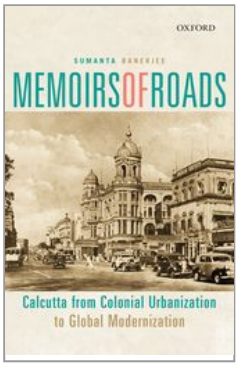

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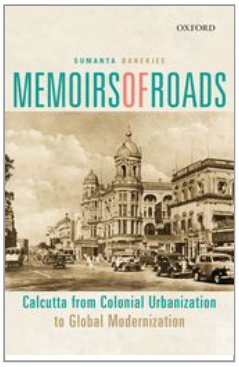

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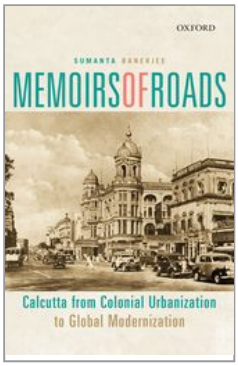

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